

interzone

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NEW SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

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novelette illustrated by Jim Burns

plus new stories by

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Gareth L. Powell

David Ira Cleary

and James White Award winner

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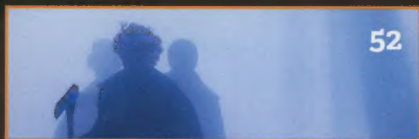
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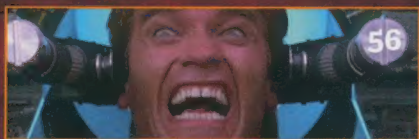
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New Format?

Beginning with issue #29 (out now), our sister magazine *Black Static* has changed its format slightly. The magazine has lost about 3cm from its height and width, but gained a lot more pages (issue #29 is 96 pages, and it's possible we could increase the page count to 128 in the near future) on opaque uncoated paper, with a thicker gloss laminated cover and spine. We were also able to increase the point size of the fiction slightly. We haven't seen it printed at the time of writing but hopefully it all adds up to a better reading and handling experience, and a format that better suits the content.

Naturally, we're wondering if we should make the same changes to *Interzone*. It'd make good sense from a publisher point of view, and more pages would be a luxury from an editorial point of view, but what do *you* think? Please let us know on the Interaction forum, or on our facebook page, or send us an email or letter.

TTA Novellas

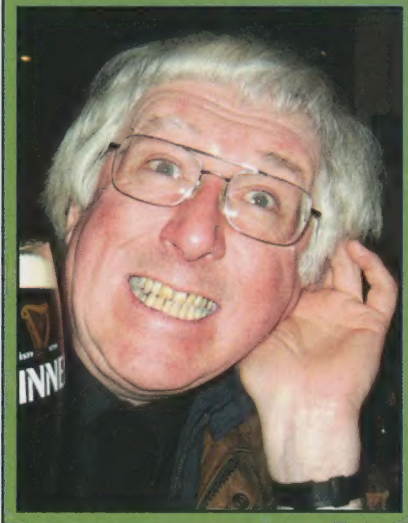
We're launching a new line of novellas soon, high quality stories that are too long to fit into the magazines. The first five are all by authors with very close links to TTA: *Eyepennies* by Mike O'Driscoll, *Spin* by Nina Allan, *Cold Turkey* by Carole Johnstone, *The Teardrop Method* by Simon Avery, and *Country Dark* by James Cooper.

Eyepennies has already received some glowing advance praise from the likes of Tim Lebbon, Stephen Volk, Paul Meloy, and Ellen Datlow, who says this: "A musician emotionally scarred by a near-death experience is haunted by his past, his present and his future in this chilling, slow burn of a ghost story. Read it!"

M. John Harrison has provided the following quote for *Spin*: "Nina Allan's re-imagining of the Arachne myth, with its receding overlays of the modern and the antique, creates a space all its own. The scene is clean and minimal, the light Mediterranean, the story seems musing and sad: but by the last two pages, *Spin* has you in a grip that persists long after you put it down."

TTA Novellas are in the 20–40,000 word range, and published as B Format paperbacks of between 96 and 224 pages. They will be available to buy singly or as part of a cheaper subscription. **You can subscribe to the first five now at a special pre-publication price of just £25, post free to anywhere in the world.** For more details please turn to page 23.

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



As Others Lump Us. 'But as Amazon's six other publishing imprints [...] have discovered, in certain genres (romance, science fiction and fantasy) formerly relegated to the moribund mass-market paperback, readers care not a whit about cover design or even good writing, and have no attachment at all to the book as object. Like addicts, they just want their fix at the lowest possible price...' (*The Nation*)

Robert Harris, best known for the alternate-history or counterfactual *Fatherland*, stated severely that all his work was factually based: 'I've no taste at all for fantasy.' (*Guardian*)

Who Goes There? A hacked electronic road sign in Boulder, Colorado, alarmed motorists with: WARNING DALEKS AHEAD.

Novel Awards. John W. Campbell Memorial (tie): Christopher Priest, *The Islanders*; Joan Slonczewski, *The Highest Frontier*. • Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize (humour): Terry Pratchett, *Snuff*; as part of the reward, some hapless Gloucester Old Spot pig is renamed Snuff before translation to a tastier plane of existence. • Compton Crook Award (first novel): T.C.

McCarthy, *Germline*. • David Gemmell *Legend* (fantasy): Patrick Rothfuss, *The Wise Man's Fear*. • *Locus*: sf China Miéville, *Embassytown*; fantasy George R.R. Martin, *A Dance with Dragons*; YA Catherynne M. Valente, *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*. • *Nebula*: Jo Walton, *Among Others* (the first Nebula winner to contain a plug for *Ansible*?).

Magazine Scene. With the appearance of the first all-sf issue of *The New Yorker* (4/11 June), genre devotees muttered about the End Times and looked nervously overhead for V-formations of winged Gloucester Old Spots. • The revived *Amazing Stories* has a 'Relaunch Prelaunch' online at www.amazingstoriesmag.com.

Michael Swanwick wrote about the passing of Hope Mirrlees's nephew Prince Robin Ian Evelyn Milne Stuart de La Lanne Mirrlees – 'almost certainly the highest-ranking noble ever to be published in *NYRSF* [*New York Review of SF*]' – and repeated a family story: 'Robin Mirrlees' mother, Hope's sister-in-law Frances de La Lanne Mirrlees, was a strikingly beautiful and of course aristocratic woman. One of her many friends was Ian Fleming. Who one day told her that he was writing a novel. / "Oh, Ian," she said. "Don't write a novel. You haven't the brains for it." (*Flogging Babel*)

That Old-Time Religion. 2011 Australian census results reveal that the Lucky Country's self-confessed Jedis now hugely outnumber its admitted Scientologists, by 65,000 to 2,163. (ABC)

Peter James, the crime novelist who's ventured into sf, reacted to a snub from Martin Amis. 'I told [Ian Rankin] I was going to get my revenge by writing Amis into the next book and giving him a very small penis. Rankin bet me a hundred quid I wouldn't. He's going to have to pay up.' In James's *Not Dead Yet*, 'Amis Smallbone is ridiculed by a prostitute, who compares his manhood to a stubby pencil. The gangster he is staying with says, "You've always traded on being your dad's son, but you was never half the man he was."' (*Sunday Telegraph*)

Space Opera. After its worst-film poll (see previous Link), *The Register* invited votes for the worst *unmade* movie. The clear winner was *The Phantom Menace*:

The Musical (with Eddie Murphy as Jar-Jar Binks), beating *Diana – The 3D Movie!!!* and *The C Programming Language*.

Fewmets! On swearing and BBFC film ratings: 'Perhaps it was to avoid such disapproval that 12A blockbuster *Avengers Assemble* (2012) looked to the past for its single instance of swearing, with a word so long out of service in spoken English that it's actually more shocking to hear: the evil Norse god Loki insults female super-agent Black Widow, calling her a "mewling quim".' (*Independent*)

Astronomical Scale. An article on e-money conveys how vastly, hugely, mindbogglingly big space is: 'Science-fiction writers once imagined a galactic currency that would grease the wheels of commerce from here to Alpha Centauri.' (*IEEE Spectrum*)

Steven Moffat received a special BAFTA Award for *Doctor Who*: 'Blimey! A Special Award! I didn't even know I was ill!' But he complained about some reactions to *Who* and *Sherlock*: 'There's been a weird backlash among, I presume, fairly stupid people about the fact the shows are complicated and clever...' (*Radio Times*) Who knew?

As Others Remember Us. Dale Winton: 'Which 1960s TV series had characters called Mr Chekov and Mr Sulu?' Contestant (after long deliberation): 'Are You Being Served?' (BBC1, *In It To Win It*)

The God of the Gongs. The 2012 Queen's Birthday honours included a CBE for Susan Hill, author of supernatural and psychological suspense novels (including the recently filmed *The Woman in Black*), and an MBE for comics writer and playwright Grant Morrison.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Circular Breathing.* 'Then Smithson screamed! His open mouth poured out a steady, unwavering screaming, while his lungs panted in and out...' (Lester del Rey, 'For I Am A Jealous People!', *Star Short Novels*, 1954) • *Literal Dept.* 'She literally flowed with stories and spunk.' (Brad Torgersen, 'Outbound', *Analog* 11/2010) • *Eyeballs in the Sky.* 'Her eyes felt lost and confused...' (James Rollins, *Sandstorm*, 2004) • *Neat Tricks Dept.* 'Invisible man casts shadow over US-China talks' (Associated Press news headline, 2012)

R.I.P.

Suzanne Allés Blom (1948–2012), long-time Milwaukee sf fan and author of the alternate-history novel *Inca: The Scarlet Fringe* (2000) plus unpublished sequels, died on 23 June.

David Bowman (1957–2012), US novelist whose *Bunny Modern* (1998) is a satirical sf dystopia, died on 27 February at the age of 54.



▲ **Ray Bradbury** (1920–2012), who for *Interzone* readers needs no introduction, died on 6 June at the age of 91 and was widely mourned by everyone from the usual sf suspects through media pundits to President Obama. Besides the landmark books *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1953, a 2004 Retro Hugo winner), his legacy included a great many magical and/or macabre short stories and a much-appreciated 1960s commercial for prunes. Bradbury received the World Fantasy Award for life achievement in 1977, the SFWA Grand Master Award in 1989, and entered the SF Hall of Fame in 1999.

Leo Dillon (1933–2012), US artist/illustrator who with his wife and collaborator Diane Dillon won many awards including the 1971 Hugo and Locus Awards for best professional artist and two Caldecott Medals, died on 26 May. He was 79. The Dillons' work for the original *Dangerous Visions* and the Ace SF Specials is fondly remembered; other genre awards include a 1982 Balrog and a 2008 World Fantasy Award, both for life achievement.

Carlos Fuentes (1928–2012), celebrated Mexican magic-realist author whose work frequently included fantastic and/or futuristic elements, died on 15 May aged 83. He received a state funeral in Mexico City.

Joel Goldsmith (1957–2012), US composer who scored various genre films (*Laserblast*, *The Man With Two Brains*, *Moon 44*, *Kull the Conqueror* etc) and almost the whole of the *Stargate* TV franchise – for which music he was best known – died on 29 April. He was 54.


Caroline John (1940–2012) UK actress fondly remembered as *Doctor Who* companion Liz Shaw in the Jon Pertwee era (reappearing in *The Five Doctors* and other specials), died on 5 June aged 71.

Hilary Rubinstein (1926–2012), UK publisher and literary agent who discovered Kingsley Amis for Gollancz, started the Gollancz sf list in 1961, and in his years at A.P. Watt (1965–1992) represented many sf authors, died on 22 May; he was 86.

Maurice Sendak (1928–2012), major US children's book artist and storyteller whose best-known works are *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963, Caldecott Medal winner, live-action film 2009) and *In the Night Kitchen* (1970), died on 8 May. He was 83. Further honours include the Hans Christian Andersen Award, US Congress National Medal of Arts and Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award.

Jim Young (1951–2012), US fan, former diplomat, actor and author of the sf novels *The Face of the Deep* (1979) and *Armed Memory* (1995), died on 12 June. He played Hitler in *Nazis at the Center of the Earth* (2012).

Late notices, missed by the SF Encyclopedia until 2012: **Lindsay Gutteridge** (1923–2007), UK author of the miniaturized-men thriller *Cold War in a Country Garden* (1971) and its two sequels, died in June 2007 aged 84. • **J.T. McIntosh** (James Murdoch MacGregor, 1925–2008), Scots author – very popular in his day – whose first sf novel was *World Out of Mind* (1953), died in 2008. His final work of sf was *A Planet Called Utopia* (1979).



A NOVELETTE BY SEAN McMULLEN

STEAMGOTHIC

THERE IS SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT THINGS that change the world. I cannot say what it is, but I can feel it. I have stood before the Vostok capsule that carried the first man into space. Influence glowed from it, I knew where it was even with my eyes closed. In the Spurlock Museum I saw the strange, twisted, lumpy thing that was the first transistor. The significance that it radiated was like the heat from a fire. The Babbage Analytical Engine of 1871 had no such aura, yet the whole of Bletchley Park did. There was no doubt in my mind about which of them had really launched the age of computers.

The Wright Brothers' Flyer had no feeling of significance for me. This made no sense. It was the first heavier than air machine to fly, it proved the principle, it changed the world, yet my strange intuition said otherwise. Then I saw the Aeronaute, and everything should have become clear to me.

THERE WAS AN 1899 Daimler parked across the road from my flat when I arrived home from work. Admirers were milling around it, and a security guard was making sure



that nobody took any liberties. I knew early model cars fairly well after being dragged along to countless car shows by my father, but cars are not my thing. Pausing only to admire the Daimler as something Art Nouveau that actually worked, I opened my front door.

On top of several packages of things ordered online was a large envelope. I seldom get letters. Anything that can be turned into text or pixels comes over the Internet. The address on the envelope was handwritten, and the handwriting was clear, elegant copperplate. A genuine penny stamp was at the top right hand corner, but there was no postmark. This had been delivered by hand. *Who writes copperplate in the second decade of the Twenty-First Century?* I wondered. Picking it up was like stepping back in time, and it begged to be opened by something with more class than my front door key.

Upstairs I found a real letter opener in the shape of a medieval sword, bought on some trip to the British Museum. The covering note merely said 'Dear Mr Chandler, can I have your opinion on the enclosed photos? Yours sincerely, Louise Penderan.' There were four photographs with the note, all colour prints on A4 paper. They were of the wreckage of an aircraft that had never existed.

Take a modern ultralight, describe it verbally to a mid-Nineteenth Century engineer, have him build one, then crash it. That was the subject of the first photo. Unlike most Nineteenth Century machines, this aircraft seemed not to have an ounce of excess weight. The background suggested that it was in a barn. The second photograph showed four lightweight cylinders that were connected in a spiral pattern to a crankshaft. This was a steam engine, and it was also built to minimise weight. The next photograph showed a propeller that resembled a windmill with two blades. The last picture featured what was left of a cloth panel with the word *AERONAUTE* painted in silver.

THE DOORBELL CHIMED while I was still examining the photos. It was 6pm, not the usual time for people peddling telco plans or religious salvation, and my friends always texted me before coming over. As I walked down the stairs I had a feeling that whoever was outside was connected with the envelope. It had been just five minutes since I had arrived home. Perhaps they had been waiting in the café over the road, giving me those minutes to examine the photographs. Perhaps they even owned the 1899 Daimler.

I opened the door to a couple dressed in matching brown ankle coats and wearing motoring goggles on their foreheads. I am six feet tall, yet they were both tall enough to look down at me. The woman gleamed with silver jewellery, mostly in the shape of electroplated cog wheels, dials and piping.

"Are you Leon Chandler?" she asked, giving me an overwhelmingly broad smile.

Her eyes were large, intense and just a little sly. They did not match her smile. I held up the photos.

"Yes, and you must be Louise Penderan," I replied.

She nodded. "That's me, and this is my partner, James Jamison."

James Jamison managed to sneer while smiling, then slowly, reluctantly, extended his hand. I registered the slight, ignored his hand, and gestured up the stairs.

"Won't you come in?" I said, moving aside.

My flat is above a shop, but it is quite large. I showed them into the living room, where they paused to look around. Their eyes lingered on the model steam engines that were on the bookshelves, and mantelpiece, and crowded into the display cases and crystal cabinet.

"Did you build all these?" asked James, making the question sound like an accusation.

"Yes, I specialise in steam engines by the pioneers: Newcombe, Papin, Heron, Trevithick, Watt, and so on. They all work."

"Yet you dress in black and have a signed Alice Cooper poster on the wall," he observed.

"Cool music."

"Your furniture and all your walls are black."

"Black is relaxing."

"So you're a Goth?"

"You may have noticed the sign on the door: SteamGoth Models."

I like to keep people guessing. Those who are too cool for school think that all steamheads wear anoraks and stand about on railway platforms spotting trains. After surviving a childhood of ridicule and bullying because I made models instead of playing online games, I had opted to dress cool, make models, and generally be a bit peculiar as an adult.

"Your models are quite beautiful," said Louise, who was caressing the boiler of a Newcombe engine with a ochre fingernail cut to a talon shape.

"It's just a hobby, but it pays."

"We actually need a professional," said James, rather abruptly.

Suddenly I had their measure. James was abrasive, but Louise followed him with praise. I was being conditioned to be sympathetic to her. She wanted something from me, something related to the wreck in the barn. I decided to force the issue. "Well then, you might as well leave," I said, gesturing to the stairs.

James had actually reached the stairs before he realised that Louise was not with him. There was a hostile exchange of glances between the two of them.

"Perhaps James expressed himself a little awkwardly," she said. "We need a professional, and you are perfect."

James capitulated. Now I knew who had paid for the Daimler.

WHILE I RATHER like the theory of steampunk fashion, I keep my distance from it. I prefer cogwheels to turn each other, not just be on display. I think that nothing is truly beautiful unless it works. For my real job I customise engines for an ultralight aircraft company, and my flat contains not a single painting or decorative vase. My Alice Cooper poster once advertised something, so it passed my functionality test. It was dad who made me this way. He had bought an

old Mini Minor a year before I was born, and a quarter of a century later the little car was still scattered all over his garage floor, supposedly being restored. From a lifetime of watching him obsessively wipe, oil and polish parts that were never reassembled, I developed a love of things that actually do something.

I SPREAD THE photos out on the coffee table and we seated ourselves around them.

"What do you think of the Aeronaute?" Louise asked.

I had decided that the aircraft was a modern steampunk sculpture, something from a pretend history. I dislike sculptures, they are form without function.

"It looks like some retro steam powered aircraft that never was," I replied, already thinking about what to have for dinner, and wondering if a well crafted insult might send them storming off down the stairs.

"The date stamped into the engine is 1852."

That was a shock. My pulse quickened as I picked up the photos and looked at them more closely. The engine was very lightly built, and the Aeronaute's frame was all thin spars, wire and wicker. Even a moderate wind would demolish it, but on a calm day it just might have struggled into the air.

I began to trawl my memories for steam aircraft. The Besler brothers had flown a steam powered biplane in 1933, and the first balloon propelled by a steam engine had flown in 1852. Steam engines are external combustion machines, so they have low power to weight ratios. They are not ideal for aviation, but neither are they out of the question.

The Aeronaute might not be a hoax, I realised. *Aviation history might have to be rewritten*. The temptation to babble hysterically was almost overwhelming, but I forced my voice to remain level and spoke slowly.

"Where were these photos taken?" I asked.

"On my family's estate, in Kent," said Louise.

"When?"

"Yesterday."

I ARRIVED AT the estate the very next morning, riding my black Vespa. One of the groundsmen told me to be off or he would call the police. "Let me guess," I said as I removed my helmet. "Louise Penderan's boyfriend told you to chase away any visitors wearing black."

He pointed to the gate and opened his mouth to shout – then apparently realised that what I had just said was true, and remembered who was paying his wages. Without another word he went into the house, then Louise came out and welcomed me. She was now wearing black overalls, a bandolier of chrome plated tools, and a technoGoth hairpin-screwdriver. Without her high heeled lace-up boots she was barely my height. James followed her, dressed in immaculate Belle Epoch motoring gear and looking unhappy.

The barn where the Aeronaute had been kept for over a century and a half was in a field behind the house.

"My family knew about it for generations, but they treated it as a bit of a joke," she explained as we crossed the field.

"Nobody ever bothered to tell me, because I think countryside stuff is only for driving past, you know? James and I came here yesterday to check if the barn was okay for our big steampunk wedding reception."

"We're getting married!" declared James, like a sentry challenging an intruder.

"I can hardly believe the Aeronaute's condition," I said. "After a hundred and fifty years of corrosion, dry rot and borers it ought to be a pile of rust and sawdust."

"The daughter of the man who probably built it, Lucy Penderan, was obsessed about preserving it in his memory. A family tradition of looking after it had developed by the time she died in 1920. The field hands give it a new coat of wax every year at midsummer."

THE DOORS OF the barn had been pushed wide open, and the aura of something that had changed the world was so strong that I began to tremble. I walked in slowly, feeling like an astronaut taking his first steps on the moon. As I got closer I saw that the Aeronaute's wreckage really was in remarkably good condition, given its age. The engine and broken airframe were preserved under coats of wax, and the silk on the wings had become like waxed cardboard.

Weight was not an issue for Nineteenth Century steam engines, because they powered big things like trains, ships or machinery in factories. By contrast, the Aeronaute's engine had not an ounce of excess weight. The fuel was oil sprayed into a furnace chamber to heat a coil boiler, and the steam was recycled through an air-cooled condenser. What alarmed me was that the fuel tank was heated by a naked flame, so that the oil would spray out under pressure. That saved the weight of a pump but increased the danger of an explosion.

"Could it have flown?" asked Louise after I had spent some minutes pacing around it with my mouth open.

"By modern safety standards it's an unexploded bomb," I said, tapping at the fuel tank. "That said...yes, perhaps."

"Could it be repaired and flown?"

"Restoration, no problem," I replied, then shrugged and shook my head.

"So you don't think it can fly?"

"It's bound to be grossly underpowered for its weight, but with a long enough takeoff run and a very light pilot, it just might get above stall speed."

"You mean fly?"

"Yes. For a few minutes."

"Why only minutes?" asked James, desperate to disagree with me about anything.

"Extra fuel is extra weight. Carry enough fuel for a long flight and it would be too heavy to get off the ground."

"But it can definitely fly?" asked Louise.

"Possibly, not definitely. Until the engine is restored and tested, we won't know if it's powerful enough to be useful. The Aeronaute may be a failed experiment, even if it's genuine."

THE MANOR HOUSE was a mixture of Regency, Victorian and Edwardian architecture, with a few more modern enhance-

ments that had probably not been cleared with English Heritage. Coffee was served to us by a Roumanian maid. Louise's parents had the easy going manner of people who were so rich that they did not have to prove anything to anyone.

"Firstly, who built the Aeronaute?" I asked once introductions and pleasantries were out of the way.

"Nobody knows," said her father. "The estate registers show that our farm workers have painted it with wax every year since mid-1852. That was just after William Penderan died in a riding accident, so my money is on William."

"The date is far too early," I began, then paused and thought about it. "Actually, perhaps not. William Henson designed his Aerial Steam Carriage in 1843, and John Stringfellow flew a steam powered model in 1848. George Cayley built a glider in 1853, and his coachman flew it over Brompton Dale."

"So the Aeronaute's age is not, er, impossible?"

"1852 is not only possible, it's unnervingly likely. That was an exciting decade for British aviation."

"Just think, all these years and we never knew," he said with a sigh.

"Another question," I said, turning to Louise. "Why me?"

"I found you with Google. You build historical steam engines and work for an ultralight aircraft company. The combination seemed perfect."

I already knew the answer to my third question, but I asked it anyway. "So what do you want me to do?"

"How much would you charge to restore the Aeronaute?"

How much would I charge? I very nearly burst out laughing. It was more like how much would I pay to be *allowed* to work on it. "I can do the engine," I said, struggling to sound cool. "That would not cost much, but the woodwork and fabric will need specialist restorers and materials."

"So you can't help?" asked James eagerly.

"Oh I can help," I said as I took out my phone. "The director of Ultralights Unlimited has had experience restoring World War One fighters. I'll give him a call now."

GILES GIBSON MADE the journey from London to Kent on his vintage BSA motorbike in less than an hour. James's reaction upon meeting him was one of instant hatred. Giles not only wore period motoring gear, he was a real pilot. He made things worse by complimenting Louise on her neo-industrial outfit, while ignoring what James was wearing.

Our inspection took about an hour. The Aeronaute had been in storage for a century and a half, so in spite of nearly thirteen dozen coatings of hot wax, even some of the undamaged wood needed replacing. The wax had saved the engine from corrosion, however.

"Well, steamgoth, how long before we have steam?" Giles asked, tapping the engine with a knuckle.

"The engine will have to be stripped down, checked for damage, cleaned and reassembled. With big budget help, a few weeks."

"Hey, I run Ultralights Unlimited, not NASA. Big budget help is not an option."

"No, it's our first option."

Giles blinked at me. "What do you mean?"

"This is Britain, Giles. Once word gets out that a genuine mid-Victorian, steam powered aircraft has been discovered, there'll be a queue of steamheads stretching from Kent to London, all volunteering to work on it."

"Could it fly?" asked Louise.

"It's underpowered, overweight and aerodynamically unstable," said Giles.

"Is that a *no*?"

"It's a *don't know*. While we're restoring the Aeronaute, we can find out by running computer simulations, then build a full scale mock-up with a petrol engine. If the mock-up can take off, we have a *yes*."

"You can use the barn," said her father eagerly.

"But what about the wedding reception?" exclaimed James.

"We haven't fixed a date for that yet," said Louise, to Giles rather than James.

"Man, we'll need to work hard and fast, or this could be like Stonehenge," said Giles. "You know, left as a glorious ruin, not restored. There's always going to be heritage airheads who want that."

"That's terrible!" exclaimed Louise.

"I'm right with you," said Giles, putting an arm around her shoulders and gesturing to the aircraft. "Leaving Stonehenge like it is just glorifies what some frigging vandal did in the past. I've worked on World War One fighters. Try to patch an original bullet hole and some tosser will scream that it's historically significant."

"So what are you suggesting to us?" asked James, hastily grasping Louise by the hand.

"I'll call the workshop and get my staff to drop everything and drive down here with the truck and some equipment. While they're on the road, Leon and I will start marking the woodwork and wire that needs replacing."

A strange tug-of-war for Louise had developed between James and Giles. I picked up a roll of masking tape and deliberately tagged an undamaged spar.

"No, no, steamgoth, only tag what I point to," said Giles, releasing Louise and hurrying over.

I HAD THE engine into the back of the Ultralights Unlimited truck by mid-afternoon, and away to the London workshop that very night. The dozen restoration volunteers that I had phoned were already waiting outside. I did not have the heart to send them away until morning, so we carried the engine inside and spent the next two hours cleaning off the grubby coating of wax with a steam jet. My fingers tingled every time I touched the engine, so much so that I had to wear gloves to work on it. At midnight we were ready for the first test. Very gently, I grasped the crankshaft and applied pressure. It turned smoothly, it had not been damaged by the crash. The cheering went on for a very long time.

In the days that followed we stripped the engine down to the very nuts and bolts, recording every detail with a video camera. We cleaned each part until it gleamed, then made laser scans for my components database. Only the leather

seals and washers had perished, and my assistants made the replacements with more love and tenderness than their wedding vows.

LOUISE WAS WAITING outside my flat in a late model BMW when I got home one evening. This time she was dressed in black lace under a black leather coat, and high heel boots. She seemed angry yet vulnerable, all at once, as she invited me to the café over the road. Here she explained that the BBC had contacted her about the Aeronaute. We never discovered the source of the leak, but someone probably spoke too loudly in some pub, and someone listening then pitched an idea to an executive at Channel 4.

"They want to run it as a reality doc," she concluded.

"I've done work for television," I said. "Camera crews mean light stands, reflectors, first and second cameras, multiple takes of spontaneous incidents, staged arguments to raise the dramatic tension, makeup artists and hair stylists. Allow that circus into our workshop and you can triple the restoration schedule."

"But Leon, we need them, they can keep the heritage people off our backs."

"So Heritage knows?"

"Yes, but the BBC is on our side. You're a big deal for them."

"Me? A big deal?"

"All of us. Instead of technerds in T-shirts and jeans, the producer has seriously cool people in great clothes doing a sensational restoration. You're the Goth engineer, Giles is the dashing steampunk pilot, I'm the glam girl patroness, and James is..." Her hesitation said more than words.

"James is?" I asked innocently.

"James has studied costume design and history, and he's a very well paid model. In steampunk costuming circles he's a also big name, but he can't help with the Aeronaute. It's causing him issues."

That all made sense. Louise was from a rich family with old money, and she liked to dress retro. She was a sensational catch for someone like James. Enter Giles, who not only dressed retro, but could restore the Aeronaute and probably fly a mock-up. James was arm candy. Giles was genuinely heroic arm candy.

"So what do we do about the BBC?" I asked.

"The camera crew only needs to be there when you're doing something important. That way nobody has much time wasted."

"Who decides what's important?"

"You do."

I agreed. The cat was out of the bag, so we had to be nice to the cat. There was one more question. "Do you feel a bit strange when you are near the Aeronaute?"

Louise's head snapped around at once. "Why do you ask?"

Why, not what, I thought. *That's significant, she does feel something.* "I've got to confess, I get an odd feeling from it, like it's haunted. I was wondering if Lucy Penderan got that feeling too, and that's why she went to so much trouble to preserve it."

"I don't believe in ghosts," said Louise tersely, but her tone said otherwise.

WE HAD TO dismantle the partly reassembled engine, then put it back together for the cameras while pretending to talk spontaneously. Louise played the role of an anxious client being briefed by myself, the suave engineer. She wore enough pewter cogwheels to build a dozen or so clocks, along with fishnet gloves, and a magnifier on a brass chain. However, her lipstick had morphed from wholesome steam-punk scarlet to Goth black.

"So no other quadricycle engine is known from the 1850s?" she asked on cue.

"That's right," I replied. "There was no demand for hyper-light engines back then."

"So whoever built this one was a genius, like Brunel?"

"Not necessarily. It's not a revolutionary design, just very light. Any 1850s engineer could have built it as a one-off."

"Do you think the Aeronaute ever flew?"

That question again.

"We'll know that after we finish restoring the engine and run it to measure its horsepower. The Aeronaute is right on the border of being workable. Its wingspan is fifty feet, the takeoff weight is about seven hundred pounds. Two hundred and fifty pounds of that is this engine, which may deliver as little as twelve horsepower. The propeller is not very efficient either. The Aeronaute is an underpowered version of the Wright Brothers' Flyer."

"But isn't that good?" asked Louise, ignoring the next cue card. "The Wrights' plane flew."

"The Flyer did manage four flights, but it was not very stable. The Aeronaute will be even less stable. It will be harder to get into the air, difficult to control while it's up there, and a total nightmare to land."

A WEEK LATER I got the engine working, powered by the workshop's steam cleaning unit. It functioned perfectly, but the verdict of the calibration instruments was not encouraging. It could deliver only nine horsepower.

The furnace was next, and that was a definite challenge to modern health and safety regulations. Try putting some kerosene into a very flimsy tank, then light a fire under it to force the fuel out under pressure. It's a simple, efficient, lightweight and mind-numbingly dangerous source of inflammable vapour. I tested the tank and pipes with compressed air, then the BBC arranged for pressure tests with real fuel to be done at an army firing range.

We produced some seriously impressive plumes of burning fuel for the cameras, but to everyone's surprise the furnace did not explode. The final, crucial tests were also done at the firing range. With the engine attached to the furnace, we ran the system at full pressure from the safety of an observation bunker. Again the producer seemed disappointed by the lack of an explosion. I was also disappointed, because once again it only delivered a fraction more than nine horsepower. However, these disappointments were nothing com-

pared to the findings of an air crash investigation team that the BBC had recruited.

I WATCHED THE third episode of *The Aeronauteers* at home, alone. A computer graphic of the Aeronaute sat at the end of a computer generated runway, the propeller turning slowly. Numbers flashed onto the screen as a wireframe pilot lay out flat on the flight bench.

"The problem appears to have been the weight of the pilot," said a voiceover as the propeller spun up to full speed and the simulation Aeronaute began to roll forward. "If William Penderan was the pilot, he was just too heavy. Estimates made from a contemporary photograph put his height at six feet three inches, and his weight at fourteen stones."

The graphic Aeronaute raced along its virtual runway. After a mile, its speed levelled off at twenty-three miles per hour.

"Penderan may have just cleared the ground, because he did not throttle back as he reached the end of the private road that he probably used as a runway. The road ended at a ploughed field. Perhaps he thought he was a few feet off the ground, when in reality his altitude was only inches. Traces of grass stains and dirt found on the wreckage indicate that the front wheel tore through grass, then hit a ploughed furrow side-on."

The graphic of the aircraft was shown crashing in slow motion. The wireframe pilot was thrown clear.

"Because of the risk of an explosion or fire, Penderan needed to get clear of the aircraft quickly in an emergency. For this reason he did not strap himself to the flight bench. He would have been thrown forward by the crash and struck one of the ploughed furrows. The death notice states that he died of a broken neck, sustained in a riding accident. This is also consistent with being thrown head first from the Aeronaute at about twenty-five miles per hour."

The virtual re-enactment now showed how the damage to the Aeronaute was consistent with rolling off the end of the road and into a ploughed field.

"Several questions remain unanswered," the investigator concluded. "Why was William Penderan's death disguised as a riding accident; why was the wreckage taken to a barn and hidden; and why did Penderan's daughter, Lucy, preserve the wreckage for so long?"

The image switched to an interview with Giles and Louise, who were standing beside the partly rebuilt Aeronaute. Both of them looked gaunt and pale, but I put that down to their workload.

"I think it came down to patent violations," said Giles. "The propeller is identical to the one used on Stringfellow's model of 1848, and the main wing is a lightweight version of the one in the patent drawings for Henson's Aerial Steam Carriage of 1843."

"So Penderan was a great innovator, but he borrowed other people's ideas as well?" said the investigator.

"That's only part of it. Put yourself in Lucy Penderan's position. Her father dies testing an aircraft that could have changed history if he had weighed fifty pounds less. If she

had gone public, somebody else could use his design, recruit a lighter pilot, and get all the glory of the first flight."

"Maybe one of his rivals."

"Precisely."

"Then why did she go to so much trouble to preserve the wreckage?"

"That I can't say."

LOUISE BEGAN TO look like a defrocked Goth who was studying to be a steampunk engineer. Her cheeks were pale and sunken, her hands were scratched and stained with paint and oil, and she moved slowly and deliberately, as if almost drained of energy. Both Giles and James seemed to think she was looking Goth because she had something going with me. Because the engine needed little work, and most of that was in London, Giles made me the acting manager of Ultralights Unlimited. That kept me away from Kent, and thus Louise...except when *she* visited London.

Goggles became a major issue as the Aeronaute's public debut approached, as was the entire subject of fashion. Steampunk costuming and Victorian fashion overlapped but did not match. Louise wanted steampunk, James wanted Victoriana. The BBC sided with James.

Louise and James were in the Ultralights Unlimited workshop, waiting for the camera crew to arrive for a shoot, when one of their many arguments flared. Louise wanted goggles to be part of Giles's 1852 aviator's costume for testing the mock-up Aeronaute. James insisted that goggles were not used until the early Twentieth Century.

"Charles Manly wore them when he tried to fly an early aircraft in 1903," James explained. "They were developed about then for early motoring. Swimming goggles came even later."

"But there are engravings of Venetian coral divers wearing goggles in the Sixteenth Century," said Louise.

"Okay, but people like coachmen or train drivers didn't use them back in 1852."

"We'll see what the web says about that."

Louise took out her iPhone. She wanted a steampunk look, and would not be deterred. "Goggles, the word is derived from the Middle English *gogelen*, to squint," she said presently. "The word goggles came into use around 1710, to describe protective eye coverings that were short tubes with fine wire mesh over the ends. Masons used them as protection against flying stone chips."

"Well *your* goggles have glass in them," said James.

"Give me the goggles, I'll run up some wire mesh disks," I called from my workbench. "Nothing simpler."

The warmth in Louise's smile could have ended an ice age, but I suspected that it was only to antagonise James. I wondered if his scowl was meant for her or me. Premarital divorce seemed to be looming like a summer thunderstorm. Meantime I had all the grief of being a romantic interloper with none of the benefits.

GILES AND HIS team of restoration volunteers took two months to strip the wax and old fabric from the Aeronaute,

then replace the broken or rotten spars. All the piano wire bracings had to be replaced, then the wings were covered with new black silk. The engine had been restored long before that, but was kept in London so that the Aeronaute could be symbolically made complete in a single dramatic scene for the cameras.

When I arrived in the company truck with the fully restored quadricycle engine, champagne and chicken had been laid out on trestles, and everyone was dressed in Victorian costumes. The camera crew was also in costume. This was definitely a 'significant event'. To dress Goth is to dress timeless, so I just borrowed a top hat from the BBC costume van and fitted right in.

James was arguing with the producer about Victorian fashions, Giles was striking poses for the BBC cameras in front of the mock-up Aeronaute, and Louise was posing for a photo before a period camera. She was wearing a voluminous period green and black brocatelle day dress over crinoline, and was looking very unhappy about it. Once the reality television opportunities had been exhausted, people began making sure that the chickens had died for a good cause, Giles took me aside.

"The mock-up is ready to fly," he said.

"What?" I exclaimed. "Already?"

"Jock, Janice and Otto ran it up in a week. It's basically just a modern ultralight with a strange design, and we installed a petrol engine with a variable governor. What's the best power you got from the 1852 engine?"

"Nine and a quarter horsepower is all I could get with optimal tuning."

"Nine and a quarter!" he exclaimed, losing his smile for the first time. "That's still a bit marginal."

"Or just plain not enough."

He looked across to Louise, who was now posing in her wire mesh goggles.

"It's probably enough to work with," Giles decided.

"In a bleeding computer!" I exclaimed. "The Aeronaute is on the very border of being flight-capable. It's seriously overweight and underpowered, but I can make a few improvements -"

"No! It must fly with the exact 1852 config. My computer models confirm that it could get just above stall speed at nine horsepower, with enough fuel for ten minutes and a ten-stone pilot."

"Ten stones!" I exclaimed. "Even a pigeon-chested tosser like me weighs more than that."

"I've been dieting."

"What? You're joking! What a great source of reality drama: will he die of anorexia or die in a crash?"

"Be serious."

"I am being serious."

"Louise is dieting in sympathy with me."

"That explains why she looks as crap as you."

"And she's stopped sleeping with James."

"What the hell has that to do with..."

My brain caught up with my tongue.

"Yes, that has everything to do with me flying the Aeronaute mock-up," said Giles. "Sorry to be so suspicious of you, I've only just realised that she's actually dressing Goth to tick off James. I'm her real hero."

In other words, *Back off steamgoth, the rich girl is mine*. At the time it seemed like the obvious conclusion, but we were both about as wrong as it is possible to be.

THE STRETCH OF straight, level private road was three miles in length. A very thorough, three day investigation by *Time Team* confirmed that it had been built around 1850. It would have been ideal as a runway, providing a firm, smooth surface that would give the Aeronaute's wheels minimal friction when taking off. The local council had restored the surface to 1850s standard, and the mayor was rewarded by time in front of the television cameras.

Giles had learned to fly the Aeronaute with a computer simulator. Getting off the ground was only part of the problem. The Aeronaute was a flying wing without a tail, so by definition it was quite a challenge to control. When flying, the simulation was balanced precariously above disaster.

"Don't worry, I'm only going to take it up a couple of feet," Giles said as I adjusted the governor to give another quarter horsepower to the mock-up.

"Good enough to kill William Penderan, good enough to kill you," I replied.

There was a great cheer as the mock-up's engine was started. I was ready with my Vespa and followed the mock-up as it rolled away along the road. At the suggestion of the camera crew, Louise was sitting sidesaddle behind me, her dress and crinoline billowing like a failed parachute. It took nearly a mile, but at last the mock-up wallowed into the air, lumbered along roughly five feet above the road for about a hundred yards, then descended.

Unfortunately it had drifted just a little off centre while airborne. The rear left wheel caught the roadside grass and the mock-up slewed around, ripped off its own undercarriage, and partially disintegrated.

Giles was unhurt because he had strapped himself to the flying bench. For his trouble he got Louise's arms around his neck and a kiss full on the lips before the cameras of the BBC - several times, to get the lighting and background correct. The achievement of the mock-up's flight, the drama of the crash, and a dash of romance sent ratings soaring for *The Aeronauteers*.

GILES BLAMED THE crash on a gust of wind. Later, in private, I learned the truth. "The controls are bad, bad, bad," he confessed. "You can't steer without dipping the wings, so you need to be at least twenty feet up first. Landing will be a disaster if there's any wind at all."

"But you've done as much as the Wright Brothers already," I pointed out.

"That's not enough. I want to do a circle, then land."

"It's still underpowered and too heavy," I said.

"I can carry even less fuel, and diet off a few more pounds."

"You should test it with a radio control unit first."

"No! We're not just refurbishing the Aeronaute, we're putting ourselves in William Penderan's position."

"Which was a ludicrously dangerous position, and which got him killed. I can hear the beating of the wings."

"Er, sorry?"

"John Bright, 1855. *The angel of death has been abroad throughout the land. One may almost hear the beating of his wings.* Death will be flying beside you if you take the mock-up any higher."

"It's worth the risk. When I'm up there it will be 1852, and I'll be proving that steam powered flight is serious tech."

"Losing control a couple of hundred feet up, then smashing head-first into a field is going to really hurt."

"I fly ultralights, I know the risks. You stick to engines."

"Speaking of engines, do you want me to service the mock-up's engine?"

"No, no, you have to go back to London today and look after the company. Everything is under control here."

For Giles I was somehow still competition in a love quadrangle, but I worked for him so I was a problem easily solved. Being safely away in London did not mean I was safe, however.

SIX EPISODES OF *The Aeronauteers* had been broadcast on Channel 4 when the scandal broke. I have Saturday nights off, and it is always for the same reason. I had reached the stage entrance of the Midnight Noon Club when the portable lights came on and the camera crew appeared. It was not the crew for *The Aeronauteers*.

"Mister Chandler, we understand that every Saturday you come to Midnight Noon to be the master of ceremonies," declared a voice from behind the lights.

I had been caught by surprise, but I have great reflexes.

"I do, and it's the best amateur Goth burlesque club in London," I said cheerily. "My stage name is Fealthy Pierre, the Naughty Gendarme. Come in, come in, you're just in time."

The interviewer had expected a cornered rat, not an invitation to the show. He could not decline because I was also recording *him* thanks to that wonderful invention, the phone camera. I recorded a performer named Furry Paws dragging him onto the stage, sitting on his lap, then stripping off most of what little she was wearing. As an exposé of my personal life, it flopped more heavily than the mock-up of the Aeronaute.

"I'm an engineer, and I do this for fun," I said as I was interviewed later in my gendarme's uniform. "Now then, what do BBC journalists do for a few laughs in their spare time?"

THE ITEM WAS broadcast the following evening on a current affairs show, heavily edited. My recording was already on YouTube. Louise staged a big party for the broadcast and insisted that I be there. The entire restoration team watched it in the manor house. For a rare moment I was a big hero, then the serious drinking began.

"It was either James or Giles who ratted on you," Louise

declared as we stood together, our words blanketed by the babble from everyone else.

"They think I think you're cute," I replied.

"Do you?"

"Thinking you're cute and being competition for James and Giles are entirely different things."

"Those girls in the club," she said slowly. "Do you ever, er..."

"Get laid? Occasionally."

"I was wondering why you never made a move on me," she admitted. "I thought you were gay or A, but now I know. I've never been so totally outclassed."

"Outclassed? You? You're so far out of my league that even fantasies about you are a waste of time."

"Crap, I'm really nothing. Everyone thinks of me as a trophy. My parents, James, Giles, my whole steampunk social scene. You don't care about trophies because they don't do anything. That makes you special."

"Er, thanks."

"Did you know that we're part of a love triangle?"

That was a shock. I glanced about. Giles was nowhere to be seen. James was standing nearby, talking to Louise's mother and looking a bit morose. There was a red wine stain on the sleeve of his coat but he seemed not to care. Perhaps he had given up on Louise. I now felt like a rabbit caught by a spotlight. Rich girls are dangerous to be around, especially when one's boss has aspirations involving them.

"I...don't think so," I replied. "You, Giles and James occupy the corners already."

"Wrong lovers, Leon. It's you, me and the Aeronaute."

"The Aeronaute?"

"You love the Aeronaute because it's genuine and it works. I love the Aeronaute because..."

She hesitated. Perhaps this was becoming too personal.

"Because the Aeronaute is an accessory that any steampunk fashionista would die for?" I prompted.

"At first, but not any more. Now it's because the Aeronaute makes me real."

Suddenly I could see where she was coming from. The Aeronaute was dreams made solid. The Aeronaute very nearly changed history, it was a more powerful agent for change than the Napoleonic Wars. For me, power radiated from it. If Lucy Penderan had flown the Aeronaute instead of her father, what might the world look like today? For Louise, putting the Aeronaute back into history meant becoming part of history herself.

THE PARTY WAS brought to an abrupt halt by Otto, who announced that the barn had been broken into. By the time I reached the barn, Giles was checking the aircraft for damage, the producer of *The Aeronauteers* was recording everything with a phone camera, and the security guards were shouting that it was a crime scene and that everyone should stay outside.

"Otto stepped out for a romantic moment with one of the volunteers," said Giles. "He saw lights in the barn and raised the alarm. I can't see any damage to the Aeronaute, though."

"I can see a problem from here," I said. "The lid of the fuel tank has been put back without being screwed down. Someone must have left in a hurry."

There was sand on the rim of the fuel tank.

"I don't understand why whoever it was did this," said Giles as I detached the tank to clean it out. "The sabotage would have achieved nothing. This is the original Aeronaute. It's not going to fly."

"He may have got the original mixed up with your flying mock-up."

"Talk sense," said Giles. "The mock-up is in the tent outside."

"I wonder if he sabotaged both?"

Giles hurried away to check the mock-up, leaving me with the original Aeronaute. Up close, the sense of its brooding power made my head throb. It was like an avalanche about to fall, not dangerous because its fuel tank could explode, but for some more subtle reason. This was a machine that *could* have changed the world in 1852, yet it felt like it actually *had*.

"The bastard!" shouted Giles, dashing back into the barn. "The mock-up's got sand in its tank too. Someone's trying to kill me."

"Sand in the tank would kill the engine before it was even warmed up."

"Someone who doesn't know engines wouldn't know that. It must have been James. That airhead fashion jock doesn't understand anything that isn't held together with buttons."

"Nobody likes competition."

"It's sheer spite! James is out of the race. Louise is sick of him, he's been acting like a tit. If I can prove that William Penderan's design beat the Wright Brothers by half a century I'll be a class-A hero. Heroes get the girls, steamgoth."

I doubted that James had done the sabotage. He had had a very crushed look during the party, and had probably given up on Louise already. Giles should not have been a suspect, because engine failure would have put him in danger, yet that danger would only last until he conveniently noticed a little sand on the side of the mock-up's fuel tank. Perhaps I was meant to be the suspect.

EVERY SERIES NEEDS a climax, and the climax of *The Aeronauteers* was to be a glorious celebration of Victoriana. Hundreds of recreationists and BBC extras in costume converged on the estate, there to eat Nineteenth Century food, dance to authentic bands playing period music, and play contemporary games. The camera crew was again in costume, with their video cameras disguised as the old glass plate variety. I had discarded my black jeans and black leather jacket for a top hat, black suit and black coat. Tents and stalls covered the grounds, but a wide expanse of lawn to the east of the house was roped off for no apparent reason.

The plan was that the fully restored Aeronaute would be rolled out and put on display, then Giles would take the mock-up for a five minute flight around the estate. The Aeronaute had not been outside the barn since it had crashed, so this was to be its first outing since 1852.

There was only one anachronism. Actually there were eight anachronisms: one air safety inspector, one industrial safety inspector, and six police. Giles was posing for the cameras beside the repaired mock-up when they arrived.

"We have reason to believe that you intend to operate an aircraft that does not conform to safety standards, and which will endanger public safety," the air safety inspector announced.

"What do you mean?" demanded Giles. "This is private property."

"This is a public event on private property."

Tempers flared, hands were waved, and the spectators and cameras crowded around. I was of interest to nobody, so I was able to mingle with the crowd that was gathering, then back away. The takeoff road was being kept clear by security guards dressed in Crimean War uniforms. A backup camera crew had been stationed beside the road. All my suspicions were being confirmed.

I MADE STRAIGHT for the barn. It was locked, but a large piece of firewood applied to the side door with all the force that I could manage had it open in one hit.

Louise was inside, wearing only dark brown tweed trousers and cloth slippers, and frozen in the act of putting on a white shirt with puffed sleeves. She was emaciated, as if close to starvation. In a medical sense, I suppose she really was starving. Her hair was plaited and coiled tightly at the back of her head, and of course the mesh goggles were on her forehead. Her mid-Victorian dress of green silk with black velvet patterning and navy blue fringing lay on the ground. Beside it were her lace-up boots.

"You guessed," she said, then turned away to button up her shirt.

"Not hard," I replied. "You stopped sleeping with James. That was not because you fancied Giles or me, but because you had practically stopped eating, and had lost so much weight that you were afraid to be seen naked by anyone. Now why would you want to lose so much weight? Moral support for Giles?"

"Bastard."

"What do you now weigh?"

She snatched up a brown leather waistcoat. Buttoned up, it disguised the appalling condition of her breasts reasonably well.

"Dressed like this, I weigh eight and a half stones," she said.

"You called the inspectors and police, didn't you?"

"Yes. It got Giles out of the way."

"While you fly the *real* Aeronaute."

"Yes."

"What Giles wants to do is borderline dangerous. What you intend to do is almost suicidal."

"And I suppose you want to stop me."

"No."

"No?" she exclaimed, then gave a smile that was all hope against despair. "Why not?"

"Because I love beautiful working things, and the Aero-

naute will not be truly beautiful until it flies. Do you know how to fly?"

"No. In 1852 nobody did, so why should I? This has become 1852, and I am meant to be Lucy Penderan, flying the Aeronaute instead of her father."

Her words made sense as re-enactment, but were devoid of common sense. On the other hand, I have never been very sensible either.

"Best to stay clear until I get steam up," I said. "When you get into the air, keep the engine on full throttle the whole time. Only power down when you want to land."

"Leon, about the landing –"

"It will be on the roped off lawn."

"You guessed?"

"Yes. It's a large, wide area, so wind drift will not matter. The grass will also slow you down quickly."

"How long have you known?" she asked, now taking me by the hand.

"Quite some time. For James and Giles you were just something to be fought over, but I could see that you had dreams. Brave, noble, beautiful dreams."

She kissed me on the lips, and I hugged her starved body very gently.

"Leon, when this is all over, I owe you a date," she said.

"I know a fantastic Goth theatre, restaurant and bar. I'll dress as Feelthy Pierre."

"And I'll be sure to wear black."

THERE WAS CLEAR and present danger from being anywhere near the Aeronaute when the engine was running. Louise stood well clear while I heated the fuel tank with a blowtorch to get pressure up. It was like having a smoke while sitting on a barrel of gunpowder. First I ignited the little tank flame, then opened the valve to the combustion chamber. The boiler flame caught with an alarming bang, then the steam pressure built up quickly. The propeller began to spin. The great thing about the quadricycle engine is that it is far quieter than an internal combustion engine. The sound was a pattering hiss, overlaid by the whirr of the propeller. I knelt behind the Aeronaute, holding it by the rear axle.

"Open the doors, then get aboard!" I called.

Louise pushed the barn's doors open, then returned to the Aeronaute and lay down on the flight bench.

"All good!" she called back. "Let go."

"Remember, full throttle until it's time to land, and you only have fuel for a half-circle of the estate," I warned. "Good luck."

The Aeronaute rolled out of the barn in near silence, but there was a ragged cheer as the people who had been watching Giles arguing with the inspectors realised that something far more entertaining had begun. The inspectors had a moment of indecision. There was the Aeronaute, but Giles was not on it, yet *someone* was on the pilot's frame. As the Aeronaute turned onto the road the inspectors and police suddenly broke off and ran after it, shouting and blowing whistles. I ran too.

The crowd cheered the pursuing police and inspectors, thinking they were part of the show. Suddenly the Aeronaute rose into the air. Just like that. After all that fuss and anxiety over lift, drag, and power to weight ratios, it was up there, flying. It gained height steadily, then Louise put it into a shallow, wobbly turn. It was not fast, it was not efficient, and it was certainly not very stable, but there was absolutely no doubt that it could fly.

All around me there was wild cheering. People in period costume swarmed onto the road, jumping up and down, clapping, pointing and throwing hats into the air. There was not a soul on the airfield or in the surrounding countryside who was not cheering, with the exception of the inspectors and probably James and Giles. Suddenly Giles was standing before me. "You'll never get away with this, steamgoth!" he shouted in my face. "You're fired, as of now!"

"Whatever, but meantime all those people are on the landing strip, you clown!" I shouted back. "You have to get them off or she can't land."

Giles ran off, shouting orders. The six police understood crowd control, so they also focused on clearing the road. The inspectors joined them, and I was left alone. Louise was about three hundred feet up, executing a wide, leisurely turn.

This was a machine that had changed a history that never was, this was the very first heavier than air flight. Louise did nothing fancy, she knew that she was on a technological tightrope. I looked at my fob watch. She had been running the engine for seven minutes, so she would have to come around for a landing very soon. Did she have a watch?

A feeling of elation at having beaten impossible odds mingled with a strangely potent foreboding. Something was wrong, even though everything was fine. The Aeronaute was underpowered, unstable and liable to explode in a ball of flames at any time; everything was against it, yet it was flying. Something ought to have gone catastrophically wrong, yet – impossibly – the Aeronaute was defying gravity and Louise was defying death.

Of all those on the ground, I alone knew where she was going to land, so it was to the roped off lawn that I now ran. Because the Aeronaute was virtually silent, at a distance I did not hear any change in sound as Louise throttled back. The distant black shape began to descend. I could barely force myself to watch. Landings are my worst nightmare, I hate them because so much can go wrong. Louise was coming down too fast, she needed a little more thrust to gain lift and slow her descent while increasing her forward speed a trifle, but she did not have the training or experience to know that.

I was biting my knuckles, tasting blood, as the Aeronaute approached the lawn. The back wheels slammed down too hard, it bounced high, and I saw that Louise was only attached to the aircraft by the levers that she was gripping. There was a second bounce, then it was rolling along the grass, slowing, as I sprinted after it.

"We did it!" she cried as I reached the Aeronaute. "You and I, we did it!"

"That's great, but get out, get clear!" I shouted. "I need to

secure the fuel heater before it explodes.”

Louise scrambled off the flight bench as I twisted valves to kill the tank and boiler flames, then I vented the pressurised fuel. Only now did I allow myself to admit that we had a major triumph on our hands. The Aeronaute had proved itself.

I NOW GLANCED around, expecting to see the six police closing in, hoping to get another hug from Louise before we were arrested. Instead I saw dozens, hundreds of police in uniforms dripping with gilt, silver and braid holding back thousands of cheering onlookers. What had been a Victorian reenactment crowd only moments before had become a horde dressed in burgundy, brown and black leather and silk, with a gleaming starscape of silver buttons and chains. Every woman's waist was laced tightly, and every man had a top hat and a cane with a silver handle. Enormous cylinders like submarines encrusted with metal lace, latticework and gantries floated in the sky above us, and metal humanoid figures at least fifty feet high loomed behind the crowds, with camera crews standing on observation platforms where the heads should have been.

A few people were allowed past the police, people in top hats wearing dark blue calf coats encrusted with gold braid, and holding jewelled metal rods capped with woven copper wire and trailing coiled cables that ran to gleaming brass backpacks covered in filigree. They were all calling out to us as they hurried over.

“Baroness Penderan, that was a brilliant reenactment.”

“Masterful landing, baroness.”

“Ladyship, were there any bad moments?”

Louise, a baroness in her own right? Like everything else, this was clearly wrong. She was the daughter of a knight, but that was as far as it went. I glanced in the direction of the manor house. A new wing had been added, built mainly out of brass lattice and slabs of turquoise glass, all surmounted by green domes and fringed with silver lace.

“The king and queen are watching, be so good as to wave to them,” said a woman wearing a golden helmet upon which crouched a winged lion. She also wore a violet cloak over gilt plate armour inlaid with vines, leaves and flowers, and inset with garnets. Suddenly a word caught up with me. King? Until a few minutes ago, Britain did not have a king as well as a queen.

We turned in the direction that the guardswoman indicated. At the edge of the lawn was a carriage of gilt, silver and scarlet. There was a steam engine at one end, polished until its parts gleamed like mirrors. It was tended by a man in a black ankle coat and top hat...and goggles. Flanking it were guards, all wearing gilt armour and holding weapons that were mainly brass coils and bronze tubes mounted on rosewood stocks, apparently powered by spheres that glowed with a silvery light. There were steps at the middle of the carriage, and at the rear was an open cabin with a tiled roof fringed with gold tassels. Within the cabin was a couple dressed in matching white shirts with puffed sleeves, brown leather waistcoats and goggles, presumably in honour of

Louise. They were waving to us. Louise and I waved back.

By now my mind was urging me to run away and hide, but I had the good sense to distract myself by draining the Aeronaute's fuel from the hot tank and releasing the steam. Cameras like brass lanterns on articulated tentacles stretched over the shoulders of the newscasters from their ornate backpacks to follow what I was doing, but I did my best to ignore them. I seemed to be known to everyone, and was probably in charge of the engine.

“Doctor Chandler, how did the quadricycle engine bear up?” someone asked, and several people thrust their metallic organic microphones at me.

Doctor? Try as I might I could not remember doing a PhD, yet that is not the sort of thing one easily forgets.

“The engine's performance was as flawless as her ladyship's flying,” I responded.

Giles arrived, and I discovered that he was now Sir Giles. Ignoring me, he began to tell the phalanx of surreal cameras and microphones about how good his restoration of the 1852 airframe had been.

I found a leaflet on the grass, dropped by some onlooker. It explained that the Aeronaute had first flown in 1852, with Lucy Penderan at the controls. It had changed history. Once the principle of a steam powered heavier than air machine had been proved, dozens, hundreds, then thousands of progressively larger steam aircraft had been built. They had established air mail services, carried the first commercial airline passengers, and dropped bombs during the Crimean War.

NOW WE ARE being herded together in front of the Aeronaute; Louise, Giles, myself, James and the restoration team. Palace flunkies are breathlessly briefing us about what we should and should not do when we are presented to the royal couple. After that, there will be a celebration, no doubt, and as a fellow celebrity I shall be able to speak with Louise. What to say? Perhaps it will be: *You know, it's probably all the excitement, but ever since you landed, I can't remember getting my PhD. Do you remember being made a baroness?* I am afraid to ask her, but ask her I shall.

If she just laughs, well I can cope with having a psychosis, it's very Goth. What a strange delusion I had, living in a dream world in which Victorian style gave way to fantasies like Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Modernism, Post-Modernism, and Minimalism.

However, if she looks very fearful and asks to speak with me later, in private, then...then all along, back in our timestream, the Aeronaute had been the key to a different history, waiting for someone to turn it. If that history has become real, then Louise and I are the only people who remember one hundred and fifty years that never were.

I rather hope that she doesn't laugh.

Sean wears black, his girlfriend is into gothic jewellery, and her cat is into whatever he is having for dinner. He lives in Melbourne, where he works with very large scientific computers during the day and writes science fiction by night. He has had seven other stories in *Interzone*.

Aliette
de Bodard

SHIP'S BROTHER

Y

OU NEVER LIKED YOUR SISTER.

I know you tried your best, that you would stay awake at night thinking on filial piety and family duty, praying to your ancestors and the bodhisattva Quan Am to find strength, but that it would always come back to that core of dark thoughts within you, that fundamental fright you carried with you like a yin shadow in your heart.





I know, of course, where it started. I took you to the mind-ship – because I had no choice, because Khi Phach was away on some merchant trip to the Twenty-Third Planet, because you were a quiet and well-behaved son, and the birth-master would have attendants to take care of you. You had just turned eight, had stayed up all night for Tet, and shaken your head at the red envelopes, telling me you were no longer a child and didn't need money for toys and sweets.

When we disembarked from the shuttle, I had to pause. It was almost time for your sister to be born, and I felt my entire body had grown still, my lungs afire, my muscles seized up, and your sister in my womb stopping her incessant thrashing for a brief, agonising moment. And I felt, as I always did during a contraction, my thoughts slipping away, down the birth canal to follow your sister; felt myself die, little by little, my self extinguishing itself like a flame.

Like all Minds, she was hungry for the touch of a human soul. Entwined around my thoughts, and in her eagerness to be born, she was pushing outwards, dragging me with her. I remembered pictures and holos of post-birth bearers, their faces slack, their eyes empty, their thought-nets as pale as the waning moon, and for a moment – before my lips curled around the mantras of the birth-masters – I felt a sliver of ice in my heart, a hollow of fear within my belly: the thought that it could be me, that it would be me, that I wasn't strong enough...

And then it passed, and I stood, breathing hard, in the centre of the mind-ship they had laid out for my daughter.

"Mummy?" you asked.

"I'm fine, child," I said, slowly, breathing in the miracle of air, struggling to string together words that made sense. "I'm fine."

We walked together to the heartroom, where the birth-master would be waiting for us. Within me, your sister was tossing and turning, throbbing incessantly, a beating heart, a pulsing machine, the weight of metal and optics within my womb. I ran my hands on the metal walls of the curving corridors, feeling oily warmth under my fingers, and your sister pulsed and throbbed and spoke within me, as if she were already eager to fly within the deep spaces.

You were by my side, watching everything with growing awe, silenced, for once, by the myriad red lanterns hung on rafters; by the holos in the corridors depicting scenes from *The Tale of Kieu* and *The Two Sisters in Exile*; by the characters gleaming on doors and walls. You ran everywhere, touched everything, laughing, and my heart seemed full of the sound of your voice.

The contractions were closer together, and the pain in my back never seemed to go away. From time to time, it would rack my entire body, and I bit my tongue not to cry out. The mantras were in my mind now, part of the incessant litany I kept whispering, over and over, to keep myself whole, to hold to the centre of my being.

I had never prayed so hard in my entire life.

In the heartroom, the birth-master greeted us with a cup of freshly brewed tea. I breathed in the flowery smell,

watched the leaves dance within the shivering water, trying to remember what it felt like to be light on my feet, to be free of pain and fatigue and nausea. "She's coming," I said, at last. I might have said something else, in other circumstances, made a comment from the *Classic of Tea*, quoted some poet like Nguyen Trai or Xuan Dieu, but my mind seemed to have deserted me.

"She is," the birth-master said, gravely. "It's almost over now, older aunt. You have to be strong."

I tried, but it all slid like tears on polished jade. I was strong, but so was the Mind in my belly. And I could see other things in the room, too. The charms against death, and the bundle at the back of the room, which would hold the injector – they'd asked me what to do, should the birth go wrong, should I lose my mind, and I had told them I would rather die. It had seemed easy at the time, but now that I stood facing the very real possibility it seemed very different.

I hadn't heard you for a while. When I looked up, you were still, watching the centre of the room, utterly silent, utterly unmoving. "Mummy..."

It looked like a throne, if thrones could have protrusions and metal parts and a geometry that seemed to continually reshape itself – like the spikes of a durian fruit, I'd thought earlier on, when they hadn't yet implanted your sister in my womb, but now it didn't feel quite so funny or innocuous. Now it was real.

"This is where the Mind comes to rest," the birth-master said. He laid a hand in the midst of the thing, into a hollow that seemed no bigger than a child's body. "As you see, all the proper connections are already in place." A mass of cables and fibres and sockets, and other things I couldn't recognise, all tangled together like a nest of snakes. "Your mummy will have to be very brave."

Another contraction racked through me, a wave that went from my womb to my back, stilling the world around us. I no longer felt huge or heavy but merely detached, watching myself with growing anger and fear. This, now, this was real. Your sister would be born and plugged into the ship, and make it come alive, and I would have done my duty to the Emperor and to my ancestors. Else...

I vaguely heard the birth-master speak of courage again, and how I was the strongest woman he knew, and then the pain was back, and I doubled over, crying out.

"Mummy!"

"I'm – fine –" I whispered, trying to hold my belly, trying to keep myself still, to gather my thoughts together. She was strong and determined, your sister, hungry for life, hungry for her mother's touch.

"You're not fine," you said, and your voice suddenly sounded like that of an adult – grave and composed, and tinged with so much fear it brought me back to the world for a brief moment.

I saw on the floor a puddle of blood that shone with the sheen of machine oil. How odd, I thought, before realising that I was the one bleeding, the one dying piece by piece; and I was on the floor though I didn't remember kneeling,

and the pain was flaring in my womb and in my back, and someone was screaming – I thought it was the birth-master, but it was me, it had always been me...

"Mummy," you said, from somewhere far away. "Mummy!" Your hands were wet with blood, and the birth-master's attendants were dragging you away, thank the ancestors. There were strong hands on me, whispering that I should hold, ride the crest of the pain, wait before I pushed, lest I lose myself altogether, scatter my own thoughts as your sister made her way out of my womb. My tongue was heavy with the repeated mantras, my lips bloodied where I had bit them, and I struggled to hold myself together when all I longed for was to open up like a lotus flower, to scatter my thoughts like seeds upon the wind.

But through the haze of pain I saw you – saw, in the moment before the door closed upon you, the expression on your face, and I knew then that you'd never forget this, no matter how it all ended.

OF COURSE, YOU never forgot, or forgave. Your sister was born safely, though I remained weak ever after, moving slowly through my own home, with bones that felt like they were made of glass, and my thoughts always seemed to move sluggishly, as if part of me had followed her out of the birth canal. But it all paled when they finally let me stand in the ship; when I felt it come to life under my feet; when I saw colours shift on the wall, and metal take on the sheen of oil; when the paintings slowly faded away, to be replaced by the lines of poetry I'd read to your sister in the womb – and when I heard a voice deeper than the emptiness of space whisper to me, "Mother."

The mind-ship was called *The Fisherman's Song*, and that became your sister's name, but in my heart she was always Mi Nuong, after the princess in the fairy tale, the one who fell in love with her unseen fisherman.

But to you, she was the enemy.

You put away the Classics and the poets, and stole my books and holos about pregnancies and Minds, reading late at night, and asking me a thousand questions that I didn't always have the answer to. I thought you sought to understand your sister, but of course I was wrong.

I remember a day seven years after the birth. Khi Phach was away again to discuss shipments with some large suppliers, and you'd convinced me to have a banquet. You'd come to me in my office and told me that I shouldn't be so preoccupied with my husband and children. I almost laughed, but you looked so much in earnest, so concerned about me, that my whole body suddenly felt light, infused with warmth. "Of course, child," I said, and saw you smile, an expression that illuminated your entire being.

It was a huge banquet. In addition to our relatives, I'd invited my scholar classmates, and some of your friends so you wouldn't get bored. I'd expected you to wander off during the preparations, to find your friends or some assignment you absolutely had to study, but you didn't. You stood in the kitchen, fetching bits and pieces, helping me make

salad rolls and shrimp toasts, and mixing dipping sauces with such concentration it was as if they were all that mattered in the world.

Your sister was there too – not physically present, but she'd linked herself to the house's com systems, and her translucent avatar stood in the kitchen: a smaller model of *The Fisherman's Song* that floated around the room, giving us instructions about the various recipes, and laughing when we tore rice papers or dashed across the room for a missing ingredient. For once, you seemed not to mind her presence, and everything in the household seemed harmonious and ideal, the dream put forth by the Classics.

At the banquet, I was surprised to find you sitting at my table. It wasn't so much the breach of etiquette – I had never been over-concerned with such strictures – as something else. "Shouldn't you be with your friends?" I asked.

You glanced, carelessly, to the end of the room, where the younger people sat: candidates to the mandarin exams, like you, and a group of pale-skinned outsiders, who looked a bit dazed, doing their best to follow the conversations by their side. "I can be with them later," you said, making a dismissive gesture with your hands. "There's plenty of time."

"There's also plenty of time to be with me," I pointed out.

You pulled your chair, and sat down with a grimace. "Time passes," you said at last. "Mother..."

I laughed. "I'm not that frail." Though I felt weak that particular night, my bones and womb aching, as if in memory of giving birth to your sister, but I didn't tell you that.

"Of course you're not." You looked awkward, staring at your bowl as if you didn't know what to say anymore. You were just fifteen, not an adult yet, and ancestors know even Khi Phach never mastered the art of small conversation.

I glanced at Mi Nuong. Your sister didn't eat, and so she spent the banquet at the back of the room, at a table with the avatars of other ships. Knowing her, she'd be steering the conversation at the table to literature, and then listening to everyone's ideas. It seemed as though everything was going well, and I turned back to the people around my table.

After a while, I found myself deep in conversation with Scholar Soi, one of my oldest friends from the Academy, and paying less attention to you, though you intervened from time to time, bringing up a reference or a quotation you thought apt. You'd learnt your lessons well.

Soi beamed at you. "Wonderful boy. Ready to sit for your mandarin exams, I'd say."

You looked pale, then, as if you'd swallowed something that had stuck in your throat. "I'm not sure, elder aunt."

"Modesty becomes you. Of course you're ready. The fear will go away once you're sitting in your exam cell, facing the dissertation subject." She smiled fondly at that. You still looked ill, and I resolved to speak to you afterwards, to tell you that you had nothing to fear.

"In fact," Soi said, "we should have something right here, right now. A poetry competition, to give everyone a chance to shine. What do you think, child?"

I'd expected you to say no, but you actually looked inter-

ested. If there was one thing you shared with your sister, and with me, it was your love of words. "I'd be honoured, elder aunt."

"Younger sister?" Soi asked me, but I shook my head.

I don't know how Soi did it, but she soon got most of the guests gathered around a table laden with wine cups, making florid gestures with her arms as she explained the rules. The outsiders, who didn't speak the language very well, had all declined, except for one, but it was still a sizeable audience. You stood at the forefront of it, eagerly hanging on to Soi's every word.

As Soi handed out turns for composing poetry, I found Mi Nuong hovering by my side.

"I thought you'd be with them," I said.

"What about you, Mother?"

I sighed. "He's fifteen, and proud of his learning. He doesn't need to compete with his forty-year-old mother."

"Or with his sister." Mi Nuong's voice was uncannily serene, but of course, navigating the deep spaces, the odd dimensions that folded space back upon itself, she saw things we didn't.

"No," I said at last. I wasn't blind, and had seen the way you avoided her.

"It doesn't matter, Mother," Mi Nuong said, still in the same serene tones. "He'll come around."

"You sound like you can see the future."

"Of course not." She sounded amused. "It would be nice, though." She fell silent then, and I knew what she was thinking: that she didn't need to see the future to know that she'd outlive us all. Minds lived for centuries.

"Don't –" I started, but she cut me off.

"Don't worry about me. It's not that bad. I have so many more things to worry about, it doesn't really loom large." She sighed. I knew she was lying to reassure me, but I didn't press the point. "Look at him. He's still such a child."

And she wasn't, not any more. Minds didn't age or mature at the same rate as humans. Perhaps it was her physiology, perhaps it was the mere act of crossing deep space so often, but she sounded disturbingly adult, even older than me sometimes. "You can't hold him to your standards."

She laughed – girlish, carefree. "Of course not. He's human."

"But still your brother?" I asked.

"Don't be silly, Mother. Of course he's my brother. He's such an idiot sometimes, but then so am I. It's what ties us together." Her voice was brimming with fond amusement, and her avatar nudged slightly closer to me to get a better view of the contest. Everyone was laughing now, as a very tipsy scholar attempted to compose a poem about autumn and wine, and mangled words. The lone outsider stood by your side, and didn't laugh: his eyes were dark and intent, and he had a hand on your shoulder as he spoke to you. It looked as if he was trying to reassure you, which I couldn't fault him for.

"He worries for nothing," Mi Nuong said. "He'll win with ease."

And, indeed, when your turn came, you got up, gently setting aside the outsider's hand, and made up a poem about crab-flowers, making puns and references to other poems effortlessly, as if it was all part of some inner flow you could dip into. People stood, silent, struck with awe, and then Soi bowed to you, as younger to elder, and everyone else started to crowd around you in order to give you congratulations.

"See? I told you. He'll fly through his examinations, get a mandarin posting wherever he wants," Mi Nuong said.

"Of course he will," I said. I'd never doubted it, never questioned that you had my talent for literature, and Khi Phach's cunning and practical intelligence.

I looked at you, at the way you stood with your arms splayed out, basking in the praise of scholars, at your face still flushed with the declaiming of poetry, and you looked back at me, and saw me sitting with your sister by my side, and your face darkened in that moment, became as brittle as thin ice.

I felt a shiver go down my spine, as if some dark spirit had touched me and cast a shadow over all the paths of my future.

BUT THE SHADOW never seemed to materialise. You passed your mandarin exams with ease, and awaited a posting from the government, though you closeted yourself with your friends and wouldn't confide any of your plans to us.

The summer after your exams, we went to see Mi Nuong, you and me and Khi Phach, who had just returned from his latest expedition. We took a lift to the orbital that held the spaceport, watching the fractured continents of the Eighteenth planet recede to a string of pearls in the middle of the ocean.

You sat away from us, reading a book a friend had given you – the outsiders' *Planet of Danger and Desire*, which was the latest rage that summer – while Khi Phach and I watched the receding continents, and talked about the future and what it held in store for us.

At the docks, the screens blinked above us, showing that your sister had just arrived from the First Planet. We stood outside the gate, waiting for her passengers to disembark – a stream of Viets and Xuyans, wearing silk robes and shirts, their faces still tense from the journey, from the odd sounds and sights, and the queer distortions of metal and flesh and bones one experienced aboard a mind-ship in deep space.

There were dignitaries from the Court itself, in five-panel brocade, their topknots adorned with exquisite jade and gold, talking amongst themselves in quiet tones, and a group of saffron-cloaked monks carrying nothing but the clothes on their back, their faces calm and ageless, making me ache for their serenity. Last of all came a vacant-eyed mother who hadn't survived the birth of her Mind, being led by her husband like a small child. My hands must have tensed without my realising it, because Khi Phach grabbed me so hard I felt bruised, and forced me to look away.

"It's over," he said. "You'll never need to carry another Mind again."

I looked at my hands, tracing the shape of my bones

through translucent skin – it had never been the same since Mi Nuong's birth. "Yes. I guess it is."

When we turned back, you weren't with us. I glanced at Khi Phach, fighting rising panic: you were an adult after all, hardly likely to be defenceless or lost. "He must have gone to another dock," Khi Phach said.

We searched the docks, the shops, the entire concourse, even the pagodas set away from the confusion of the spaceport's crowd, before we finally found you.

You were at the back of the spaceport, where the outsider hibernation ships berthed, watching another stream of travellers, their pale skins glistening from the fluid in the hibernation cradles, their eyes still faraway, reeling from the shock of waking up, the knowledge that the thin thread of ansible communications was their only link to a home planet where everyone they had ever held dear had aged and died during the long journey.

Khi Phach called out your name. "Anh!"

You didn't turn. Your eyes remained on the outsiders.

"You gave us quite a fright," I said, laying a hand on your shoulder, feeling the tension in your muscles. I thought it was stress, worry at the new life that opened up for you as a mandarin. "Come, let's see your sister."

You were silent and sullen the entire way.

Khi Phach introduced himself to the crew member who guarded the access to the ship, telling her we were family. Her face lit up, and she congratulated him on such a beautiful child. I'd expected you to grimace in jealousy, as you always did when your sister was mentioned, but you didn't speak.

"Child?" I asked.

I felt you tense as we walked into the tunnel leading to your sister's body, as the walls became organic, as faint traceries of poetry started appearing, and a persistent hum rose into the background. Your sister's heartbeat, reverberating through the entire ship.

"This is stupid," you said, as we entered.

"What is?" Khi Phach asked.

"Mind-ships." You shook your head. "It's not meant to be that way."

Khi Phach glanced at me, inquisitively. For once, I was stuck for words.

"Outsiders do it better," you said, your hands shut into fists.

We stopped in the middle of the entrance hall. Rafters adorned with red lanterns, poetry about family reunions, your sister's way of welcoming us home. I knew she was listening, that she might be hurt, but it was too late to take this outside, as you'd no doubt intended all along.

"Better?" I asked, arching an eyebrow. "Years in hibernation, leaving everything they own behind?"

"They don't take mind-ships!" You weren't looking at me or Khi Phach, but at the walls, your sister's body wrapped all around you. "They don't go plunging into deep space where we were never meant to go, don't go gazing into things that make them insane, they don't...don't birth those monstrosities just to navigate space faster!"

There was silence, in the wake of your words. All I could

think of was all that I'd ignored; the priests' books that you'd brought home, your trips to the nearby Sleeper Church, and your pale-skinned outsider friends, like the one who had spoken to you so intently at the banquet.

"Apologise to your sister," Khi Phach said.

"I won't."

"You just called her an abomination."

"I don't care."

I let go of you then, moved away with one hand over my heart, as if I could make the words go away. "Child. Apologise. Please," I said, in the tone that I'd used when you were little.

"No." You laid a hand on the walls, feeling their warmth, and pulled back, as if burnt. "Look at you, Mother. All wasted up, for *her* sake. All our women, subjugated just so they can birth those things."

You sounded like Father Paul; like an outsider yourself, full of that same desperate rage and aggressiveness, though, unlike them, you had a home to come back to.

"I don't need you to defend me, child," I said. "And we can resume that discussion elsewhere." I waved a hand, forestalling Khi Phach's objections. "But not here, not in your sister's hearing."

A wind rose through the ship, picking up sound as it whistled through empty rooms. "Abomination..." Mi Nuong whispered. "Come tell me what you think, to my face. In my heartroom."

You stared upwards, as if you could *see* her, guess at the mass of optics and flesh plugged into the ship, and before either of us could stop you, you spun and ran out of the ship, making small, convulsive noises that I knew were tears.

Child...

I would have run too, but Khi Phach laid a hand on my shoulder. "Let him cool off first. You know you can't argue with him in that state."

"I'm sorry," I said to Mi Nuong.

The lights flickered, and the ship seemed to contract a little. "He's frightened," Mi Nuong said.

"Which is no excuse." Khi Phach's face was stern.

But he hadn't been there at the birth. He didn't remember what I remembered, the shadow that had lodged like a shard within your heart, that coloured everything. "I should have seen it," I said. Because it was all my fault, because I should have never brought you to the ship that day. What had I been thinking, trusting in strangers to protect my own child?

"You shouldn't torment yourself," Mi Nuong said.

I laid a hand on a wall, watching lines of poetry scroll by, songs about fishermen flying cormorants over the river, about wars dashing beloved sons like strings of pearls, about the beauty of hibiscuses doomed to pass and become nothing, just as we, too, passed away and became nothing, and I thought about how small, how insignificant we were within the world, about letting go of grief and guilt. "I can't stop," I said. "He's my son, just as you are my daughter."

"I told you before. He'll see it."

"I guess," I said. "Tell me about your trip. How was it?"

She giggled like a teenage girl. "Wonderful. You should see the First Planet, it's so huge. It has all those palaces and gardens, covering it from end to end, and pagodas that go all the way through the atmosphere, joined to orbitals, so that prayers genuinely go out into the void..."

I remember it all; remember it vividly, every word, every nuance that happened that day. For when we came home, you weren't there.

You'd packed your things, and left a message. I guess you were a scholar in spite of everything, because you didn't send a mail through the terminal, but wrote it with pen and paper: crossed words over and over until they hardly made sense.

I can't live here any more. I apologise for being an unfilial son, but I have to seek my fortune elsewhere.

Khi Phach started moving Heaven and Earth to find you, but I didn't have to look very far. Your name, barely disguised, was on the manifest for an outsider hibernation ship headed out of the Dai Viet Empire, to an isolated planet on the edge of a red sun – a trip sponsored by the Sleeper Church. The hibernation ship had left while we were still searching for you, and there was no calling it back, not without starting a war with the outsiders. And what pretext could we have given? You were an adult, sixteen already, with the mandarin exams behind you, old enough to do what you wanted with your life.

You wouldn't age in your hibernation pod, but by the time you arrived twenty years would have elapsed for us, making the distance between us all but insurmountable.

Khi Phach fumed against the Church, speaking of retribution and judgement, making plans to bring this before the local magistrate. I merely stood still, watching the screen that showed the hibernation ship going further and further away from us, feeling as though someone had ripped my heart out of my chest.

MANY YEARS HAVE passed, and you still haven't come back. Khi Phach took his anger and bitterness to his grave, and I stare at his holo every morning when I rise, wondering when I, too, will join him on the ancestral altar.

Your sister, of course, has hardly aged. Minds don't live like humans, and she'll survive us all. She's with me now, back from another trip into space, telling me about all the wonders she's seen. I ask about you, and feel the ship contracting around me – in sadness? In anger?

"I don't know, Mother. The outsider planets are closed to mind-ships."

I know it already, but I still ask.

"Have you..." I bite my lips, pull out the treacherous words one by one. "Have you forgiven him?"

"Mother!" Mi Nuong laughs, gentle, carefree. "He was just a child when it happened. Why should I keep grudges that long? Besides..." Her voice is sadder now.

"Yes," I say. "I've seen the holos too." Gently, carefully, I pull out your latest disk and trigger the ansible record it contains. An image of you hovers in the midst of the ship, transparent and leached of colours.

"Mother. I hope this finds you well. I have started work for a newscast. This would please you, wouldn't it, my being a scholar after all?" You smile, but it doesn't reach all the way to your eyes, and your face is pale, as if you haven't seen the sun in a long time. "I am well, though I think of you often."

The messages all come through ansible. So do money transfers – as if money could reduce the emptiness of space between us, as if it could repay me for your absence. "I was sorry to hear about Father. I miss you both terribly." You pause then, turn to look at something beyond the camera. I catch a glimpse of slim arms, wrapped around you – a quick hug, to give you strength, but even that doesn't light up your eyes or your face – before you look at the camera again. "I'm sorry. I... I wish I were home again."

I turn off the disk, let it lie on the floor. It becomes ringed with scrolling words, with poems of sorrow and loss.

"He's happy," Mi Nuong says, in a tone that makes clear she believes none of it. "Among the outsiders."

Walking in a strange land, on a strange world, learning new customs in an unfamiliar language, away from us, away from your family. "Happy," I say.

I touch the disk. I know that if I turn it on again, I'll hear your final words, the ones that come at the end of the recording, spoken barely loud enough to be heard.

I miss you all terribly.

Us all. Father and mother – and sister. This is the first time you've ever admitted this aloud. And I've seen the other, earlier holos, seen how your eyes become ringed with shadows as time passes, how unhappiness eats you alive, year after year, even as you tell me how good life is among the outsiders.

I'll be long gone when your pain becomes heavier than your fear, heavier than your shame, when you turn away from your exile and return to the only place that was ever home to you. By the time you come back, I'll be dust, ashes spread in the void of space, one more portrait on the ancestral altar, to be honoured and worshipped. I'll have passed on to another life, with the Buddha's blessing.

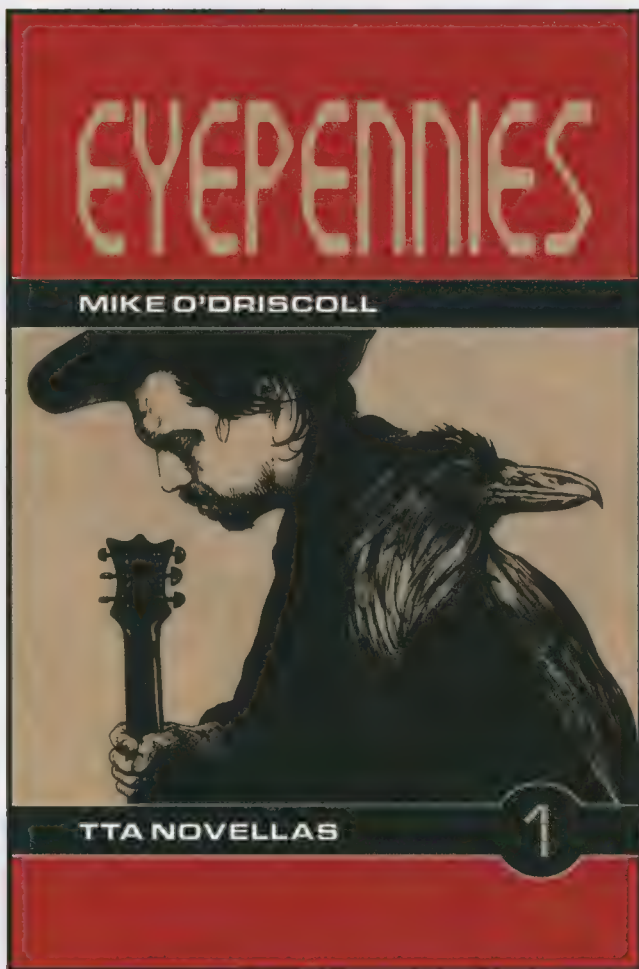
But I know, still, what will happen.

You'll walk out of the outsiders' docks, pale with the lack of sun, covered in the slime of your hibernation pod, shaking with the shock of awakening, your eyes filled with the same burning emptiness I remember so well, the same rage and grief that all you've ever held dear has been lost while you travelled.

And, like an answer to your most secret prayer, you'll find your sister waiting for you.

Aliette de Bodard lives in Paris, in a flat with more computers than warm bodies, and two Lovecraftian plants in the process of spreading tendrils all over the living room. In her spare time, she writes speculative fiction: this story is part of the Xuya continuity (which includes stories previously published in *Interzone* as well as two Nebula Award nominated pieces). Her latest novel release is *Obsidian and Blood*, an omnibus from *Angry Robot* which collects all three volumes of the Aztec fantasy mysteries featuring priest-investigator Acatl. Visit aliettedebodard.com for more information.

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DAVID IRA CLEARY 1 DAY IN TIME CITY

JOEY'S IN THE 60S, ABOUT TO DO A HEIST. THIS FAR UP-
town, he's arthritic in his hands, sore and knobby-jointed. But
his knees and ankles are grand as ever, so he rides his moped.

The moped's sweet. Seven gears, top speed forty, courier
backpack fastened to a rack behind the seat. Best of all, its
brake pads are new, and stopping's quick.

Like now. The Conquistador 6-by-6 he's behind (three axles,
five tons) brakes suddenly. A moped with old pads would flip
him backside to the tinted rear window. But the new brakes
stop him upright.

He sees himself reflected in the Conquistador's gleaming
citrine shell. Blue Pick-Up Boy helmet, eager frightened eyes,
smile lines like riverbeds, the smile itself automatic though his
gray nostril hairs are trembling.

"Sorry!" shouts the Uppie who's driving.

Joey doesn't quite believe him. Especially given that, as the Conquistador starts up, it becomes clear there was no reason to stop.

He locks his moped to a parking meter at 63rd and Eon. He grabs the courier backpack, and carries it into the Art-Deco-style Very Large Motors office building across the street. The security guard, who knows him, passes him through. The new receptionist on the eleventh floor, who doesn't, is suspicious.

"It's not even nine, bike-tyke."

Joey wouldn't have expected disdain from a chunky guy in a white pony-tail who's wearing an earring and a garish red tie. Dressed like a Downster but acting like an Uppie. Probably a bounder, a guy unhappy with his social class. Joey feigns a hearing problem. "Yeah, you can sign." He pushes the invoice across the desk. "I'll take it to her office myself."

Her being Carla Dakota, Chief Vision Officer for Very Large Motors.

"She's not in yet!"

Joey waves affably as he enters the office area. He hopes the pony-tailed receptionist is green enough he won't call security. He smiles at the one person he sees, a lady with thin hen-naed hair enjoying her coffee, sitting in a cube so small she has to be a Downster. Then he reaches Carla Dakota's office.

It's a big corner office, pure Uppie, with a view of the Farlands across the bay. There are framed posters of old ad campaigns on the walls. Models of Sport Utility Cars hang from the ceiling like stuffed birds in a museum.

On the shiny U-shaped desk is the model Joey wants.

It's called the Ghengis Khar. Tri-axled and made of balsa wood, it's a foot long, eight inches high. Small numbers until you consider the scale. 1:35. Seats for ten, with a living area subdivided into two levels.

It seems nothing more than a scaled-up Celestial Adventurer, last year's flagship model. That is, until Joey rips the model off the base and spots the retractable units at both ends of the vehicle. When you touch a lever on the undercarriage, a row of wooden needles springs out from each bumper. Joey pushes them back in. They are sharp enough to hurt his thumb. Like tiny too-sharp toothpicks.

"Whoa-boy!" he says.

Clearly meant to puncture bike tires.

A clock on the desk pings softly. 8:45. Joey packs the Ghengis Khar into his backpack, cushioning it with Styrofoam. He leaves the office.

Spying two security guards approaching the reception desk, he goes the other way.

He strolls. Uptown his mind is fast but his body's slower, more resistant to panic. He follows the perimeter of the floor, cubicles on his left, glass-fronted offices on his right. He's glad this is the 60s, not the 70s. Just a few streets further uptown the offices would be full of white-haired early risers.

He completes the square, passes through the reception area.

"Stop!" shouts Pony-tail. "We got something to ask you!"

Joey presses the down button for the elevator. He waits

until he sees Pony-tail hurrying toward him, waving a rolled-up newspaper. "I said stop!"

Joey takes the stairs. Stepping quickly. Here's a surprise: Pony-tail follows him. Shouting, taking his job far too seriously. The guy's heavy steps echo in the cement stairwell so it seems there's more than one of him. Joey maintains his pace. No running. His hips hurt when he turns at the end of each flight.

Pony-tail is suddenly quiet. Joey's alarmed. He imagines the guy clutching his chest, slumping to his knees on a landing. Some guys aren't meant to run. At least not when they're uptown.

Just as he reaches the first floor, he hears Pony-tail shout, "We're going to get you!"

Joey's glad the guy's okay.

Smooth sailing until he gets to his moped.

It's been torn in half by a Land Yacht. The Yacht's rear bumper caught the frame behind the steering column, pulling it away from the parking meter. Seat and motor and rear wheel are still attached to the meter, which is bent. The front wheel and steering column are still hooked to the bumper. The Yacht's parked a few yards down the street, hazards flashing. Its bumper isn't bent at all.

When Joey pushes the front wheel, it spins freely with a wobble.

He notices the two security guards coming out of the building, Pony-tail behind them.

The passenger-side door on the Yacht is unlocked.

Joey climbs in. He smells leather. He'll be safer in back. Coming around the passenger seat, he bumps his knee on the dashboard food-tray, setting a bowl of oatmeal to quivering.

He crawls down the carpeted aisle, past two rows of seats. The back's a bedroom, with a frilly white bed and chifon curtains and a Leif Garrett poster on one plaster wall. He hides between the bed and the vanity, burying himself beneath teddy bears and stuffed giraffes.

He hears voices outside, but the Yacht is so well insulated that he can't make out any words.

When he's sure they aren't coming into the Yacht after him, he sits up. He thinks things through. He's grabbed the Model, but has lost his moped. On the street he'd be a pedestrian in a Pick-up Boy uniform. He'd be as conspicuous as a glass tower in kidtown. He could wait until darkness, walk safely down to 43rd Avenue, but it would be hard exchanging the moped for a motorcycle without a moped to produce. Maybe, though, the front half would be acceptable, if he could pry it off the bumper.

He hopes the Yacht owner won't park in front of the VLM building all day.

He pushes animals off his body, stands, then, with a cry of, "Whoa!" falls onto the bed. His kneecap aches where he bumped the tray. No swelling visible, but that will come. He is proud of his legs. They retain their musculature into the 70s, but the joints, the ligaments and cartilage, became fragile much lower.

He limps to the Yacht's little fridge. No ice, but he finds a six pack of Uptown Ale ("You *want* to get old for it"). He sits on the bed and holds the cold cans against his knee and considers the bedroom inside the Yacht. Pink walls, a seven foot stucco ceiling. Too low. He'd get claustrophobic if he had to sleep here. Sometimes he understands why Uppies always want their SUCs bigger.

He's started drinking from one can when the Yacht's horn honks.

He slips down by the animals. A woman gets into the Yacht. "Shit," she says. She sobs for minutes. Joey's nervous she'll never start the Yacht. He finishes the can of ale, which doesn't help the nervousness, but makes him feel he might float to the ceiling along with the animals. In the 60s, he gets drunk easily.

He falls asleep.

When he wakes, the Yacht's moving. In the tight space he feels a claustrophobic panic. He cries out as he pushes himself up.

His wrists hurt like nails have been hammered through them. His left hand is clenched closed. His veins are ropy, his skin spotted like a cheetah's hide. His shorts are loose around his thighs. His knee is an ugly purple.

She's driving the wrong way.

Further uptown.

Groaning, creaking, hips aflame, he moves to the cab. "Where *are* you going?"

She stops the Yacht, looks at him skeptically. White hair in bangs and pale blue eyes and the fine pretty features that some Uppies preserve no matter how far up they go. "Why are you in my car?"

"Look!" He points toward the passenger-side mirror. "You broke my moped."

She squints. "Oh, dear." He sees now she has twin worry lines, deep along the bridge of her nose.

Eyes watering, she turns away.

Joey was expecting harsh words. Or at best money pushed at him. Not *this*.

They are at 88th and Eon. There's a green windowed pyramid in the street in front of them. Part of a mansard roof. Maintenance standards are low this far uptown.

The woman regains her composure. "You should get out."

"But you wrecked my moped. I don't have wheels now."

"These wheels aren't going the way you want to go."

"I just need to get to 43rd."

"Let me rephrase. I'm not going south."

"But - " he points - "nobody goes further uptown than this. You could have a heart attack. You could lose your mind."

"I thought bike boys raced uptown to prove how tough they were."

"Not this far."

"Please get out."

"I'm not walking forty blocks." Joey sits in the passenger seat. "Don't you owe me at least a ride?"

"I'm sorry." She doesn't say about what - the moped, her

attitude. She drives around the pyramid. They pass abandoned cars, rusty but intact. Up here few have the strength to lift hubcaps, let alone wheels. She maneuvers around office furniture and broken glass fallen from an International Style tower. At 89th Avenue, she stops. "Get out."

"Are you punishing yourself?" Joey asks. "For wrecking my moped?"

She stiffens. "Get out."

He's hit a nerve. Not that it's the moped. Sometimes Uppies get afflicted with a conscience. They'll drive small SUCs, overtip couriers, even slum it downtown for a day or two. But nothing drastic like this.

"This seat's comfy," Joey says. He doubts she'll go much further if he stays aboard. "I'll ride with you."

She shrugs and crosses 89th.

Joey wonders: why try to save her? Is he soft this far up? Or is it that he thinks she's cute?

A post-modern building's collapsed. He can tell by the rubble blocking the street: the window panes like Fresnel lenses, the curves in the structural beams, the copper gargoyles, whose face is unmistakably Mickey Mantle's. No way past this. She'll have to turn around.

She puts the Yacht into four wheel drive.

She takes them up a slope of bricks and sparkling glass. The bricks shift beneath the Yacht's weight. Joey expects the hill to topple, drop the Yacht then crush it. But she handles the vehicle expertly. They crest the hill then follow the easier far slope down.

Safe on asphalt, they pass 90th.

"Why do this?" Joey asks.

A vein, delicate and green, pulses in her temple.

Joey says, "If something's broken, if something's wrong, you can always go back and fix it."

"No, I can't. It's too late. Life's not just bodies."

"Too late for what?"

Tears brim in her eyes. The nose lines are so deep you wonder if they touch bone.

He pats her shoulder. "Too late for what?"

She blinks. "At VLM. It was gone."

"What?"

"This year's model. The Ghengis Khar!"

Midtown Joey might freak, jump out of the car, but up here his body's slow enough he can think of eight or ten things to say to calm himself before his nerves take over. And things to say to her. "You're in trouble - because it's gone?"

"I'm not in trouble. You bike boys are in trouble!"

Is she accusing him? "I don't follow."

"I thought bike boys had spies! I'm the *prototype artist*. I build balsa models. Usually to the specs engineers give me. But this time was different."

"How?"

"Carla Dakota wanted APS! The engineer didn't!"

"APS?"

"The Aggressive Pathway System. Blades that extend from the bumpers. They're going to market them as debris catchers. When it's obvious that what they'll do is slash bike tires

and carve up legs!"

"Oh boy," Joey says. Partly because the leg-carving possibility hadn't occurred to him. Partly because he is seeing four women instead of one. "So there was controversy."

"Even some hawks were appalled by the idea. The engineer sent me specs without the blade. But Carla made it clear the model should have it!"

It is his right eye. If he closes it, he just sees one woman. "And so you added the leg-carvers."

"Yes! I added the blades, and delivered the model late Friday. Then I decided I should stand up to Carla!"

Things click for Joey. He has a cataract. And: "You went in because you wanted to take the model back. But it was gone."

"I was going to fix it! I was going to break off the APS units! But Carla must have taken it home!"

"No, she didn't," Joey said.

She stops the Yacht. Intersection of 92nd and Eon. The traffic light is stuck on yellow. A little past the avenue, four trees grow side-by-side in the center of the street. Correction. One tree.

She's weeping. With his clawed left hand Joey touches her shoulder: it's hunched, raised higher than the other. Joey feels tears in his own eyes. God, the indignities of age. "We stole it. Me and another bike boy."

She shakes her head. "Don't believe you."

"We took it this morning. He's got it now."

"You're lying." She pushes his hand away. She's stronger than he is. She drives forward, slowly.

"I'm not. We went in at 8:30 and I grabbed it while my partner talked to the receptionist." Joey's voice is tinny. With his right eye open he sees eight trees. "My partner's got it now. You've got no reason to feel guilty."

"You lie," she says. "I bet he's at 43rd Avenue, isn't he?"

"He's downtown." It was true enough that he and his roommate Wayne lived on 24th Avenue. Their apartment doubled as the City-Wide Headquarters of the Bike Defense League, and Wayne, Chairman of the BDL, was expecting the model.

They're approaching the trees. Joey thinks of kites and picnics and the toothpicks used to hold together club sandwiches. *Toothpicks*. "When you hold it you push a disk and these toothpick things come out."

She cries harder. There's a roar like a waterfall as they reach the trees, and then suddenly she's turning the Yacht around them, all of them at once, and just for a second, at the apex of the turn, Joey sees uptown not just trees but a welcoming green forest.

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE a drive toward downtown to make you feel better. Joey's eye clears, his hand unclenches, his calves regain definition and he fills his shorts again. He pissed them uptown. He can smell that now.

"You drank my beer," the woman says.

"You wrecked my moped."

"True," she says. She's not weepy anymore. Her nose lines don't cut so deep. She's tough like you expect Uppies to be. But there's also something friendly in her eyes. Gratitude,

maybe. "Why steal it?"

"To figure out something protective. We knew VLM was going to put something dangerous on the new model."

She says nothing, but doesn't cry either.

At 67th they hit traffic. Stop 'n' go, cacophony of horns, exhaust fumes so thick they tint the aluminum towers blue. She turns on the Yacht's air filter. She turns off the hazards, which had been blinking the entire ride.

A guy in a Pillager pick-up opens his door as a lane-splitting bike boy approaches it. The bike boy leans hard left, almost falling into the car in the next lane, but passes under the Pillager's door. He recovers to vertical the other side.

"Hey!" Joey says. "Great technique!"

"I'm sorry he had to use it."

"Not your fault."

"You don't know how many times I've given Carla *exactly* the designs she wanted."

"Designs don't matter as much as assholes," Joey says.

At 66th they see why there's a traffic jam so late. Police cruisers are parked in front of VLM.

She turns east onto 66th, follows it to Temporal Park, but instead of joining the traffic going south on Fleet, she drives into the park.

"Wow!" Joey says. She plows through brush, she fords streams, she scrapes the base of the vehicle against stones. They might be the only Yacht in the park, though, as they are driving up a hill of birch trees and crabgrass, they pass a stretch limo with tank tread wheels coming down.

"Shit!" she says.

"What?"

"Executives hate trespassers."

"Let them pout."

"Don't you see? They'll call the cops."

They follow the park to its end at 53rd. Joey's alert and adrenalized. There's no doubt about *why* now. Her hair is turning brown. She's not so thin anymore, especially in the chest. And she's brave and breaks the rules and acts more like a Downster than an Uppie.

Joey leans over and kisses her cheek.

She pushes him away. "Let me drive."

MIDTOWN. WHERE UPPIES and Downsters mingle. Where bounders burn their savings on three-bedroom brownstone flats. Where Uppies down on their luck or desiring to improve their souls by living like a Downster rent those same flats once the bounders are evicted. Where Joey first realizes he might get laid today, if he can get her downtown to his apartment.

But first they go to the Exchange Building, on 43rd. They don't have much choice. The Land Yacht couldn't make most turns south of 40th. And Joey needs a motorcycle.

Joey gives her his address, an address on 24th Avenue, at Tick-Tock Square. "Offices of the BDL. The Bike Defense League. My partner Wayne's got the model. Let's meet there."

He's afraid she'll think he wants to abandon her. But he must be sweating sex hormones by the liter. "Okay," she says.

"What are you carrying in that?"

"Floppy disks," he says, putting on the backpack. He gets out of the Yacht so she can join the queue for the valet.

The Exchange Building is a granite Neo-Classical structure fronted by big marble columns. Bike boys and office messengers, word processors and janitors, waitresses and plumbers, are riding their machines (moped, bike, or motorcycle) up a cement ramp toward the building's entrance. Joey takes the staircase. His knee's sore but his calves are bulging. The Exchange's dusty inside smells of fumes and motor oil and is raucous with the sound of motorcycle engines being gunned. Joey forgoes the lines of people with machines and walks to the end of the long counter, where there's a placard reading SPECIAL SITUATIONS.

"I need a motorcycle. My moped was wrecked."

The clerk arches his pierced eyebrow. "I don't see the moped."

"Most of it's uptown. I've got the front wheel outside."

"I need the whole moped for a trade. Unless you want a bike."

Joey takes a sturdy twelve-speed. Coasting down the exit ramp, he passes Pony-tail, who's sitting on the staircase eating his lunch from a paper bag.

"You!"

Joey starts off. Slaloming around other bikes, standing as he pedals because the bike's in a high gear, he follows the ramp down, then rides the sidewalk. He reaches the Land Yacht, which is at the front of the valet line.

The woman's in the cab.

"What are you doing?" she says.

He points back at Pony-tail, who's slim and sprinting after him. He motions for her to get out, and when she doesn't, he opens the passenger door, lifts the bike - "Take it!" - then climbs into the cab.

"What the hell?" she says.

"Why aren't you in a new car?"

"They said they had to notify the insurance adjuster because of the moped wheel."

Pony-tail pounds the window.

"Go! They were probably calling the cops."

"And now they will for sure," she says, starting off.

They take 42nd east, then The Split Second Parkway south. Joey, pressing the bike against the dash so it doesn't fall on him, feels the great energy of the chase and the even greater one of love. He wants to stroke her brown shiny hair, kiss her long-lashed eyelids. She's preoccupied with driving, though. Split Second's the widest road midtown, but still the Yacht's too big for a single lane. She flattens the mirrors of the little SUCs in the lane over, makes a *thump* on Joey's side of the Yacht.

"What was that?"

Joey looks in the mirror. "You just dragged a Scamper out of its parking space. Knocked off my moped wheel too."

"Great. Is that him way back there?"

Joey looks. He has a fine view of the bikes and the SUCs

behind them. And there's Pony-tail, on a moped, two blocks behind and gaining.

Ahead a few blocks, Split Second becomes one-way. One way the wrong way: uptown. Most southbound traffic turns west on 31st. 31st can get clogged so Joey says, "Turn here."

"On 35th? It's an alley!"

"You'll fit."

She doesn't. She turns too tight, taking out the signal pole then hitting the Kwik Shoppe grocery on the near corner, bringing down bricks onto a display of half-price cucumbers. The Yacht stops. "Shit!" She puts it into reverse, then into 4WD, but gets only grinding and more bricks. "We're stuck!"

"Let's go on my bike!"

Joey's out of the Yacht. He gets on the twelve speed. He sees the Yacht is blocking the alley. "Get out this side!"

Pony-tail has reached the corner. She's out, climbing onto the handlebars.

Pony-tail jumps off his moped. He starts to climb onto the hood of the Yacht.

"Wait!" she says before Joey starts pedaling.

She throws a wad of bills at the mustached man in a grocer's apron who's just come out of the Kwik Shoppe crying.

They don't lose Pony-tail until 33rd and Eon. The guy's fit in the 30s, a runner, and with the woman sitting on Joey's handlebars, it's hard for Joey to get the bike up to speed.

But at Eon, Joey runs the red light, the Predator pulling a mobile Farmer's Market uptown honking at him. And seeing Pony-tail stop at the red light, as if obeying traffic signals might earn him points towards Uppiehood, Joey gets inspired. "Let's ride the Market!"

The Farmer's Market is a flat trailer, a third the length of a city block, with a greenhouse atop it. It moves less than a mile an hour. Still in the intersection, greenhouse full of dead cornstalks between them and Pony-tail, they climb onto the trailer near its rear wheels, the woman first, Joey handing her the bike.

Then through an access door into the greenhouse itself.

"Keep low," Joey says. They crawl across the furrowed mulch, toward a pile of cornstalks and debris from the last planting cycle. It's humid and warm but all Joey can think about is the fine shape of her gray-skirted buttocks before him.

Recorded thunder crackles from speakers. Cold water from overhead sprinklers douses them. "Shit," she says, when the rain has stopped and they are sitting close to the cornstalks. "Look at me."

Her skirt is muddy, her nylons streaked with grease, and her wet blouse clings to her so that Joey can see the shape of her breasts. The automatic rain has raised a sweet smell of manure but also, from her body, a heady mix of perfume and perspiration and wet hair. Joey is aroused. "I think you're beautiful."

"Why is that guy after you?" she asks.

"He's a bounder."

"You did something to him."

All at once, shoots break through the mulch, like an array of green swordpoints thrust upward from below. One pokes Joey in the butt. He slides off the shoot towards her, but as he moves to embrace her, he catches his backpack on a sharp broken cornstalk. "Oops!" He's stuck. "Don't want to break it!"

"Break what?" she asks.

He pulls his arms out of the straps. "The mod- the floppy- the disks."

Before he can stop her, she has the pack down from the cornstalk. She opens it. "I thought so."

"I can explain," Joey says. "I wanted to help you."

"My car is wrecked. I've lost my job. I'm sitting in manure. I don't need your explanations." With her hair brown, her blue eyes are startling. "Let's do things my way now."

"Okay."

She takes putty and a utility knife out of her purse. She begins to work on the Ghengis Khar.

As the rows of plants individuate, tomatoes where they sit, stalks of corn in four other rows, Joey wonders how he's going to get the model to Tick-Tock Square.

And he wonders if he has any chance of getting laid.

He watches her finish altering the model. She's already filled the blade holes and cut away the lever and spring for the APS blades. Now with her knife she levers out the units themselves. Even with the tomato plant sending vines around her ankles, her hand is steady, her motions sure. Joey feels the same admiration he'd have for a bike babe who'd trimmed her delivery time by car-roofing down a busy street. There are too many reasons to love her. He watches green buds turn into green fruit. "You know," he says, "if we go hide at the BDL office, it will be easier getting uptown tonight."

"I don't care about easy. I care about fast."

"I can bike you uptown in fifteen minutes."

"I don't need your help. I have my car."

"Your car's stuck," Joey says.

"I'll get it towed."

Three Downsters carrying baskets enter via the forward access door. At that end of the greenhouse, the corn is full-height, the tomatoes fat and red. Harvest time.

"Hard to get a tow truck downtown," Joey says.

"I'll take my chances." She's up, model in hand. One Downster notices her but she ignores him. "I'll see you around."

"At least let me escort you back to your Yacht."

She shrugs, not dismissing him, but not encouraging him either. He pulls off a half-ripened tomato then follows her, trampling over the vines, pushing through the corn. They emerge from the greenhouse as the Farmer's Market pulls into its parking area north of 34th Avenue. Uppies are waiting there to shop, but there's no sign of Pony-tail.

On the street, four-story redbrick rowhouses, Joey's pedaling his bike in its lowest gear, while she walks beside him. She won't ride with him but seems less angry. "So why *did* you lie to me?"

"Because I like you. I wanted to be with you longer."

She half-smiles. Then: "Damn."

They've just turned onto 35th. The Yacht's surrounded by a crowd. Moped cops are cordoning off the area with yellow crime scene tape.

"I'm not in trouble?" she asks. "They're not going to blame me?"

Joey doesn't know. He wants to jump off the bike and reassure her with a hug. Instead he says: "Give me the model. I'll take it to the cops and turn myself in."

"How gallant," she says. Her voice is sarcastic but her eyelashes sparkle with tears. She turns away and wipes her face then looks at Joey and, after taking a deep breath, says, "Let me get on your bike."

"You want to go uptown?"

"Let's go further downtown first."

AND SOUTH ON Century Boulevard, the model making her purse bulge, Joey embarrassed by a hard-on but puzzled too. "Why south?" he asks, raising his voice because he is pedaling fast enough that the air pushes back her hair.

"I want to shop!"

"For what?"

"You'll see!"

Puzzling him further because even slumming Uppies shop in the 30s.

He worries the sight of the cop mopeds has unhinged her.

But how can you worry much downtown? They reach the 20s and the streets get narrow, so narrow that the Avenues are impassable by the smallest car or SUC, and even on the Boulevards cars are discouraged strongly. They pass a Scamper retreating uptown, chunks of rotten vegetables adhering like ornaments to its hood, wipers smearing the fecal matter dumped upon the windshield. Joey shouts, "It'll wash off!" to the anxious driver. There are flowers in the building windows, and guys playing flutes for pennies, and women on ten speeds with crepe paper streamers in their hair. Everyone is strong and young and healthy. They cheer Joey like he's brought back a prize. A guy drinking smuggled Uptown beer toasts them as they pass. A woman walking a wire strung above them across the street calls out, "I love your shoes!" and she, the model-builder, takes off her black business pumps and tosses them at the wire-walking woman, who catches one.

"Hey!" Joey says.

They reach 24th Avenue, Tick-Tock Square, and Joey stops.

"The BDL is in that building," he says, pointing at the stone building with Gothic arches across the square. "Do you want to come up and show them the model?"

She studies the many guys sitting on blankets, selling cutlery and worn jackets and action figures from TV shows. "I want to shop."

"You can shop later. Why not come up first? They'd really like to see the model."

"I want to shop."

"Okay." She's so beautiful that Joey finds it hard not to stare

at her face. "Do you still want to take the model uptown?"

"Of course. Why?"

"It's going to be a problem if I go to the BDL with nothing to show."

She says nothing, but her nose lines deepen.

Joey walks the bike a couple of feet, feels beneath his heel the place where concrete ends and cobblestone begins, feels also the reckless strength that surges through him whenever he goes this far downtown. "It's yours. I shouldn't have even asked. But maybe you can let me have the toothpick blades."

"For the BDL?"

"Yeah."

She gives him the two APS units along with the springs and lever.

Joey kisses her on the lips.

She doesn't return the kiss but her nose lines soften momentarily.

"Wait for me," he says.

"WHAT THE FUCK is this, dude?"

Wayne, shaved head, beady eyes, black goatee to his shirtless well-muscled chest, holds an APS unit in his palm. He sits cross-legged on a battered wooden desk, which is pushed against an arch-shaped stained-glass window.

"It's the weapon, from the model."

"What good is it to me?"

"It's a blade," Joey says. "Build your fenders."

"I can't design *shit* based off just this. Where's the rest of it?"

"I gave it back."

"To *her*?" Wayne thumps the window with his elbow. "I saw you with the smog queen."

"She's *the artist*. She built the model and broke off the blades and that's how they're going to build it now."

"She told you that?"

"She says if she stands up to Carla Dakota, other people will follow."

"You *believe* her? She's *delusional*, dude. She's got killer cars on her conscience and that's made her crack. And she's mindfucked *you*, too." He snaps the toothpick blades in half. "You've been uptown too much. You're trusting a slumming Uppie just because she looks good in a skirt. You've forgot what it's about."

Joey glances at the tall dusty corridor leading to his bedroom. "And you've been sitting on your ass too long to have any perspective."

"*Perspective*?" Wayne opens a manila folder off the desk. "How's this for perspective? 46th and Eon, bike babe crushed dead by a Universal. 51st and Split-Second, pedestrian flattened by a Predator. 60th and Century, office temp hit by a Pillager running a red light. Broken leg and pelvis. And that's just *this week*. You want some more *perspective*, dude?"

"I know that crap. That's why I took the model."

"And that's why you're going to go down there and get it back from the bitch!"

He throws the toothpicks at Joey and they bounce off his

chest.

"Fuck you, *dude*." No sex, no model, and now attitude from Wayne. Joey wants to punch him but he makes himself walk to the door. "She's doing more for us than you ever have."

JOEY'S SO ANGRY that he doesn't recognize the woman until she pushes the bike up to him. "You okay?" she asks.

He stares at her. She's wearing a blue stocking cap and a hideous knee-length sweater striped purple and yellow. "Yeah, I'm fine. You found what you were shopping for?"

"No. My clothes were too big, so I bought this. But there's something else I need."

"Maybe you can find it uptown."

"No." Her brows are knit. "Take me down. To kidtown."

ON EON, SOUTH of 17th, his butt aching from the cobblestones, watching the grease stain across one of her calves, his anger vanishes, his horniness returns. "Hey!" he says to her. "Let's have lunch!"

He points at the plaster-and-adobe two story building midblock. Not only does a kid sell you sandwiches and soda-pop, but there's a bedroom in the back you can rent for a quarter.

"I want to go further," she says.

"Whatever." He wants to please her. He just hopes she doesn't want to go south of 10th, because sometimes even Downsters playing kid forget themselves and don't come back.

"Why don't they fix the buildings?"

They go past some sort of temple, with stone columns like at the mid-town Exchange Building, but the wooden roof collapsed. Pigeons coo from the wreckage. "Kids don't come downtown to do *work*."

The 14th Avenue Exchange is two long rows of bike racks, run by a girl in an ankle-length black sweater and with a shaved head just sprouting yellow fuzz.

For the 12 speed, they get two little bikes.

They ride on dirt streets between little buildings that look like beehives. Joey likes the sparkly red banana seat his bike has, though he doesn't actually *sit* on it until 12th. His legs are too long until then.

"Watch this," Joey says just past 11th. He does a wheelie. It's a fine one, lasting seconds, rear wheel following the bike tire rut in the road. But when he comes down, his helmet falls over his eyes. "Hey!"

He stops. She's giggling at him. He takes the helmet off and throws it disdainfully to the ground. But he's glad to see her smile. Her teeth are white as dinner plates.

She picks up the helmet, then attaches it to her purse. He realizes she's taller than him now.

Joey wants to entertain her.

He tells jokes, he rides no-hands, he puts on a floppy straw hat with a hole in its top. At a house that is nothing but a brick foundation, a low wall around chest-high bushes, he

captures a small tan lizard. He puts it into his mouth and pretends to chew and swallow it. "Gross!" she says. As she looks away, he spits it out. He tastes something sour-yucky. The lizard peed inside his mouth.

Just down the block is one of the beehive houses. It's crumpled on one side but has a smooth slope on the other. At the bottom of the slope, there's dirt piled up in a big half-pipe shape.

"Whoa!" he says.

Kids have ridden this house before.

He hikes up the crumpled side, part-rolling, part-carrying the bike.

To his surprise she follows him, bringing her bike.

He climbs on his bike, looks at her. She's pale, unsmiling, nose-lines deep.

"You don't have to do this," he says.

She stares at him. "I want to."

"Cool. Just wait till I'm out of the way."

He does the beehive. It's steeper than he'd thought, and he panics at the start, but then his body takes control. Wind in the face, joy of speed and weightlessness, crackle of plaster beneath his tires, then he's on the dirt. He veers up the half-pipe, slows, turns and coasts back down to a stop.

She comes down as slow as she can. Braking, coasting, braking, so slow he's sure she's going to fall. But the fall doesn't happen until she reaches the half pipe. She loses her momentum, teeters, then falls onto her side.

"Are you okay?"

He's expecting terror. But she's giggling, and the nose-lines are almost gone. "Let's just go a little further downtown."

He'll do anything she wants.

Eon ends north of the 6th Avenue ziggy-rat.

Joey's heart goes thump-thump. He's never been south so far, never seen the ziggy-rat so close. Hills of rubble at its base. The ziggy-rat itself is as tall as the VLM building. It's built of gray bricks stuck together with green mortar. It's got a long staircase out front that seems to touch the sky.

He's inspired. "Let's climb it."

"And ride down?" she asks.

"Yeah!"

She grins. She's missing her top front two teeth.

They walk their bikes across the little hills, which are made of bricks too, only pieces. They walk carefully, because the bricks shift beneath their weight. On top of one hill there's a crushed soda-pop can. When Joey kicks it his shoe comes off.

He ties the shoe back on as tight as he can.

They start up the ziggy-rat. The sun is bright in a glaring blue sky. The staircase bricks warm his feet and make them sweaty so he slides in his big shoes. He's soon breathing hard, arms hurting from holding the bike. He wants to rest, but would be embarrassed to rest before the girl does. Halfway up the staircase there's something metal in the shadow of the staircase wall. When he gets there, he'll rest.

The girl's bike makes a ka-chink each time she raises it a

step. The ka-chinks get slower and then they stop.

She leans her bike against the wall.

"You don't want to ride down the ziggy-rat?"

"I'll help you with your bike." Her face is red. "And you say, zigg-oo-rat."

"Uppsies say," he says, irritated. But he lets her hold one handlebar, while he holds the other and the seat. His irritation passes. He keeps looking at her. Her face is cute. Sweat sticks a strand of hair to her cheek. He wants to brush it back but touching her would be weird since she's a girl.

The metal thing's a rusty bike with training wheels, atop some clothes and sticks. He doesn't stop. "What's that?" she says.

"Training wheels!" he says.

"No, below it."

"I don't know."

She lets go to look. He keeps pushing. He gets a few steps further up when she lets out a cry. "It's bones!"

She's moved the rusty bike. It's left an orange bike-shaped drawing on the black cloth. A sweater. He's sees finger bones sticking out from beneath. There's a lump beneath one end of the sweater.

He pushes at it with his toe and a yellow skull comes out.

"Hey!" he says, jumping back.

The skull seems to look at him, then starts rolling down the stairs.

It makes a fragile tap sound against the bricks.

"Cool," he says, though he's more scared than delighted.

She looks at him. Her nose lines have returned. "We can't go any farther."

"We're almost to the top."

"It's not safe. People don't come back from where we're going."

"But you *wanted* to."

"I changed my mind."

He looks at her. She's chewing on her lower lip. She has all her kid's teeth now. He says: "Maybe I want to keep going."

"No," she says. "Come back with me."

"Why? Why should I?"

"Because," she says. Then the nose lines go away almost. "Because I'll let you kiss me again."

"I could kiss a lizard too," he says, but he picks up the bike and turns it around.

THEY TAKE CENTURY north. At 12th Avenue she stops. "I want to look in here."

It's an abandoned mud-walled building that had once been covered with colored tiles that made a picture. Now all you can see of the picture is the head of a dog, cocked to one side, and part of a sign above the head. The sign says RECORDS AN APES.

"I'll guard the bikes," Joey says.

The wooden door at the entrance has an oval-shaped hole, which she crawls through. Joey hears her move things inside, watches dust puff out from the dim interior.

He's rubbing his knee, which is sore from riding or maybe

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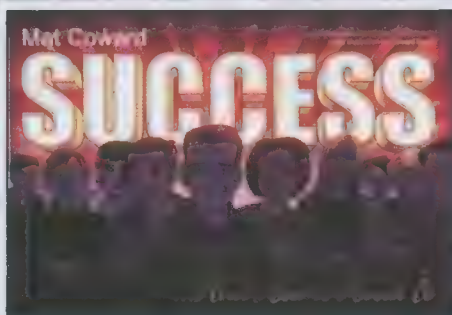
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growth pains, when a kid rides up to him.

The kid's on a tricycle that's way too small, and he's wearing a tie and Uppie dress slacks that are way too big.

"Nice wheels," Joey says.

"Give it to me," the kid says.

It's Pony-tail. His long hair's loose and shiny black, his pudgy face dimpled.

"What's it to you?"

"You stole it. It's not yours."

"Finders keepers." Joey studies the grease stains on Pony-tail's slacks. Must have caught them in the chain. "Hard to be a bike-tyke when you're dressed like a bounder."

Pony-tail gets off the tricycle. "What did you call me?"

Joey stands. "I didn't call you anything. But you *are* dressed like a bounder."

"I'm dressed like an Uppie!"

"Then you *are* a bounder!"

Pony-tail punches Joey square in the stomach.

Joey bends over, eyes watering. He regains his breath after a few seconds, sees Pony-tail standing with his hands in fists but waiting, as though it's Joey's turn to throw a punch. Instead of obliging, Joey charges, ramming his shoulder into Pony-tail's chest, knocking him down.

"Stop it!"

It's the girl. She pulls Joey off Pony-tail.

"What's going on?" the girl says.

"He hit - " Joey starts.

"He stole - " Pony-tail says.

"Is this about the model?" she says. They both nod. She pulls the Ghengis Khar out of her purse. One wheel is missing. She digs in her purse until she finds it, and pushes it back onto the axle. Then she hands the model to Pony-tail. "You'll take it back to VLM?"

"Yes."

"You do that. I wouldn't want you to lose your job."

"Did you find what you wanted?"

"Yeah," she says. "A record."

"What record?"

"I'll let you know."

THEY EAT SPARE ribs at Minute Steak on 26th Avenue, then ride a tandem bike toward Midtown. She's riding forward, steering, looking fine. Her sweater looks less ugly in the deep blue light of dusk. She kissed him during dinner, and promised to kiss him once again. Joey wants more, of course. She won't say where she's taking him. He's hoping to her apartment. She lives on 71st, in an apartment with maid-service and a doorman.

He's at her mercy and riding a rush like he felt going down the beehive.

But she turns way too early, making a right on 35th.

"Hey!" he says.

The Land Yacht has not been towed.

Streetlights are on now. But they don't explain the brightness of the Yacht. "It's burning," she says, but they get closer,

and understand. There are candles, dozens, of all colors, fat and skinny, tall and short. They are burning on the car, the hood and top and bumpers mostly, but some are affixed to the windshield, and even a few to the side windows, pointing horizontal, though the flames go up. Rivulets of wax streak the sides. Bouquets of flowers circle the Yacht, piled three-deep on the asphalt. Smells comes in alternating waves, now hot wax, now carnations and gardenias.

"It's like a shrine," she says.

"But nobody's here worshipping," Joey says. "Maybe it's a thank you."

"For what?"

"For changing the model."

She says nothing to this.

They get off the bike, step across the Police Line tape. He looks at her. This old, the nose-lines are etched permanent, but they get deeper when she's worried. Not now. Now, she smiles.

She unlocks the passenger door, and tells him to get in and go to the back.

It's dark in the bedroom. As he steps down from the passenger aisle, Joey trips and falls on the bed. "Can you turn a light on?"

"I want to save the battery." She draws back the curtain near the vanity. The candlelight colors her gold and shadowy. She opens the vanity's top drawer, takes out not the negligee or condom that Joey hopes for, but a record player. After setting it on the vanity, she plugs it in, then takes the record she's found, a 45, out of her purse. "Dance with me."

"Dance?"

"Yeah. Don't you like the Bay City Rollers?"

"Not Leif Garrett?"

"Couldn't find that."

Hisses and pops as the record starts. The song is 'Saturday Night'. Loud and optimistic and as joyfully irresponsible as youth itself. Joey dances with her. They clap with the Rollers, they brush against each other, they shout the chorus. She pushes up the sleeves of her sweater, raises it to show her thighs. Joey's thrilled, smart like he's just drunk a single beer, and as he touches her hand, she suddenly makes sense to him. "You know, you only have to take care of yourself!"

"What?" she says.

"You can live without being responsible for everyone!"

She shakes her head as though she can't hear him, but then she turns the music louder. And they dance, and they dance, and Joey forgets his thought, and in the candlelight the lines along her nose seem to disappear.

Dave was born in Wyoming, grew up in Colorado, and has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1990. He's worked variously as a programmer, a technical writer, and the story writer for an online game company. He's published about 25 short stories, with the most recent being a fat novella in the April 2012 issue of *Asimov's*. The author would like to thank all the participants at Walter Jon Williams' Rio Hondo workshop for their suggestions on making 'One Day in Time City' a better story.

railroad angel

Gareth L. Powell

This is Gareth's 5th story in *Interzone*. He is the author of the novels *THE RECOLLECTION* and *SILVERSANDS*, and the short story collection *THE LAST REEF*. In January, Solaris will publish his latest novel, *ACK-ACK MACAQUE*, which was inspired by his short story of the same name, which came first in the 2007 *Interzone* readers poll. You can find Gareth online at www.garethlpowell.com.

SO NEAL'S OUT ON THE RAILROAD TRACKS IN MEXICO, wearing nothing but jeans and a T-shirt. It's February 1968 and the air's cold. He's been at a wedding, and now he's out wandering in the night, miles from anywhere, feeling old and slow and tired.

Out here, he can hear himself think. His shuffling shoes crunch the cinders between the railroad sleepers, and his heart beats a ponderous rhythm in his chest. He holds a cigarette pinched between thumb and forefinger. When he drags on it, the tip flares like a firefly in the Mexican night.

He's four days away from his forty-second birthday. He's been married and divorced so many times he doesn't like to think about it, and there's a bone-deep weariness about him that may or may not have anything to do with the barbiturates he's taken.

He kicks at a pebble, thinking of his friend Kesey, just out of jail and living in a chicken shack in Oregon; of Allen back in New York, growing bald and mystical; and Jack sitting bloated and paranoid at his mother's house, pissing away his talent in front of the TV.

Neal takes a final pull on his cigarette and flicks the butt into the darkness.

"Fuck it. If I had a good car, I'd be gone too."

He gives the stars a lopsided grin. Nights like this remind him of his days working as a brakeman for the Southern Pacific, riding freight trains up and down the coast out of Los Gatos. The sway of the cars, the rhythm of the rails. He starts clicking his tongue.

Clackety-clack, clackety-clack.

And then, all around him, he sees the sparks.

At first, he thinks he's hallucinating. They drift down out of the air like silent embers, as if his flicked cigarette set the sky smouldering. Some of them settle on the tracks, others in the grass to either side. He puts a hand out to catch one.

"Goddamn it!" He stops walking and sucks his fingers. The spark was *hot*.

He looks around but sees no fires in the surrounding fields,

and nothing in the sky above but stars and cloud. For a wild instant, he thinks of the atom bomb tests in Nevada, but the underground test site has to be a thousand miles north of here. No, these sparks aren't man-made, Daddio. They've got to be something else, something unusual.

If they're even real.

Neal watches them settle around him, in a circle maybe twelve feet wide. Hundreds of them, like burning snowflakes. He drops to one knee and bends in close. The sparks are flickering from within, their light alternately dimming and brightening, pulsing in time to their own mysterious beat. He blows on them, and they brighten in response, like barbecue coals.

"Weird."

He blows on them again, marvelling at the way they flare in response. Then a twinge in his back makes him straighten up.

"Getting old," he mutters, and folds his arms. Sparks or not, it's getting cold and he can't help shivering. He shuffles forward again, hands in the pockets of his jeans. Time to move on, baby. Time to go.

He's not really sure *where* he's going, but that's never been the point. He knows he just has to keep moving, putting one foot in front of the other.

He steps out of the glowing circle and walks on maybe another thirty paces before he stops again, to light another cigarette. As he sucks it to life, he turns to look back at the embers, and jerks in surprise. A figure stands in their orange light, in the centre of the circle.

"Christ!" He puts a hand to his chest. Beneath his fingers, his heart's like a dynamo, hammering away in there, rattling the ribs.

The figure in the circle's tall and thin and androgynous-looking, and its skin glows with the same intensity as the sparks around its feet. When it speaks, its voice carries the clear ring of a struck wineglass.

"Hello, Neal."

Neal's cigarette falls to the ground, forgotten. He takes a step backward, palms raised to ward off the apparition.

"I know this is an awful shock," the figure says, "but please try to relax. I know you have many questions, and I *will* try to answer them. But right now, you need to put down your hands and relax."

Neal swallows. From somewhere, he hauls out some of his old swagger, and sticks out his chin.

"W-what do you, like, want?"

The figure takes a step forward.

"I am here to wake you, Neal." It sounds sincere. It has its hair cropped short, blonde on top and white at the temples.

"And you're what?" Neal wipes his bottom lip on the back of his hand. "A Martian?"

The figure smiles and shakes its head as if it's been expecting the question.

"I am not a 'Martian'."

Neal scratches his head, pushes a lick of hair back into place. "I see. Well, if you're not a Martian, what are you?" He thinks of the mystical visions Jack wrote about in his later books: of saints and angels. And he thinks of Kesey and the Pranksters, and LSD. Could this be an acid flashback? His heart's still banging away behind his ribs. Have the barbiturates triggered some sort of episode?

The figure takes another step towards him. Only a dozen yards of track now separate them.

"I am one of the curators of your reality." The shining figure waves an arm to encompass the world and the stars above it.

"You mean, like, an angel?" That might explain the sexless beauty of the creature.

The figure's head dips in a small shake. Its smile doesn't falter. "I'm afraid not, Neal. I'm as human as you are." It glances down at itself. "At least, I am when I wear this body. You see, my colleagues and I are from a time far beyond the prediction wall of your culture – a time of universal computation, complexity and consciousness." It takes another step towards him, hands held out like a compassionate Christ. "We have the ability to recreate all possible quantum brain states, to simulate all possible worlds, and thereby resurrect the uniqueness of everyone, every single person who ever lived."

For a moment, it pauses. The wind blows cold.

"In short, Neal, we are the dreamers, and you are the dream."

"You're serious?"

"I am never anything but."

Neal grips his trouser legs to stop his hands from shaking. His mouth goes dry. He wants to flee but he can feel the weight of the drugs in his system, like rocks in his pocket, dragging him down. He tries to turn away, but his shoe slips on the splintering wood of an old sleeper. Instantly, the angel's at his side, buoying him up, and he can feel the warmth of its radiance on his face.

"What are you doing?" He feels weak. His arms and legs are cold and heavy like old rubber tyres, and all he wants is to sleep.

The angel says, "You are dying from exposure and an overdose of drugs." Its fingers on his arm are reassuringly warm and unbelievably soft, its presence like the comforting touch of late afternoon sunlight. Neal's teeth begin to chatter. Even with the heat of the creature beside him, the cold night air seems to be blowing right through him.

"I'm d-dying?"

The angel supports his elbow. "Do not be ashamed. There is no shame in death. All that has happened has happened before and will happen again. Right now, this simulation has simply run its course, and it is time for you to choose a new path."

Neal wants to struggle, but he can't move. "Choose?"

The angel fills his vision, impossibly beautiful in a chaste, asexual way. "We can rewind your life back to the moment of conception. You can choose to relive it over and over again, playing out all possible variations, all possible scenarios. You can be anything and everything that you are capable of being."

"Or?"

The angel folds its hands. "Or you can come with us into the real world, at the end of time itself, and join our contemplation of the dark infinities that lie beyond."

Neal closes his eyes. He can feel sensation leeching from his body. The chill of the air creeps into his head. His mind struggles at a glacial pace. He thinks of his scattered friends, his missing father, his estranged kids. He thinks of all the girls, all the pool halls and highways, and wonders if he has the energy to do it all over again.

The angel leans close, face inches from his. "Are you tired of living, Neal?"

Neal snorts. He's spent the last ten years trying to live up to the image Jack created for him, trying to be the wild-eyed, car-driving madman of his friend's first big autobiographical novel. And now, there's nothing left. Everybody's had a piece of him and he's all used up, a husk of his younger self.

Still, that doesn't mean he's ready to *die*. At least, not yet. There are faces he wants to see again, unfinished business with his wives that he has to resolve. He wants to say all this aloud, but the words won't come. His mouth won't work. He gives a shake of the head, and his eyes fill with tears.

The angel touches his forehead. "Never fear. You will see them again. You will see all of them again."

Neal's head lolls backward, and his limbs flop like cut elastic. He can feel his body shutting down around him. For a moment, he kicks against it, hanging on to life by his fingernails. Then he feels himself slip. His jackhammer heart stutters to a halt, and a wave of resignation breaks over him.

Maybe this won't be so bad, he thinks.

But then the angel passes a hand through him, and he turns into a cloud of sparks. His physical self falls away beneath him like a shed lizard skin, and his soul leaps skyward.

Yeah, baby!

He gets one last look at his body, lying in a lonely heap on the Mexican rails, and then he's passing through the clouds towards the stars – rising like sparks shot from a locomotive's smokestack, borne aloft on angel's wings. ♦

The James White Award is a short story competition open to nonprofessional writers and is decided by an international panel of judges made up of professional authors and editors. Previous winners have gone on to either win other awards or get published regularly, which is exactly why the award was set up.

The winning story receives a cash prize, a handsome trophy and publication in *Interzone*. Entries are received from all over the world, and a shortlist is drawn up for the judges. The judges for the 2011 award were novelists Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Juliet E. McKenna, plus the *Interzone* fiction editors.

The James White Award was instituted to honour the memory of one of Ireland's most successful science fiction authors, James White. To learn more about James White and his writing please visit SectorGeneral.com, and to learn more about the Award itself visit jameswhiteaward.com.

The 2012 competition is now open.

The closing date for the receipt of entries is December 16th. The winner will receive £300 and publication in *Interzone*. The runner up will receive £100.

2011 James White Award Winner

Invocation of the Lurker C.J. Paget

Tara shifts uncomfortably on the batik cushion. Her pale skin scatters light from candles and glow-globes, creating her own little puddle of luminosity in the twilight room. Her hosts keep to the edges, the outer darkness. Their lights are the glow of intoxicant roll-ups, or the many stylistic flourishes of zoner fashion. There's the winking-blinking of electronics, worn like jewellery or implanted into flesh; communications devices that one-time-rich-people like Tara don't need. Some lights are the symptoms of 'bad-bugs,' designer viruses left over from the Big-Bad-Mad; phosphorescent teeth, luminous pattern-rashes, glowing veins. In the zones people sometimes accept these infections willingly, as a badge of tribal membership. Everyone in this group has green, glowing irises; she's surrounded by voyeuristic stars.

It's not fear that's the source of Tara's discomfort, they've been perfectly gracious hosts: it's embarrassment. She's ashamed of her unscarred skin, her clean blood, her enhanced looks and her good education. Every time she opens her mouth she doesn't belong. She makes a point of being excessively polite and deferential, so they see she doesn't think they're beneath her. She activates her neural weave and noodles around a little on the local nets, to show she doesn't fear getting head-hacked, though in reality she's quaking behind her personal firewalls. She's careful to drink the mint tea with exhibitionist appreciation, so they see she's not some tourist, afraid of bio-mal in every mouthful.

"Tea's not that good, Kingdom-girl," says the Shamaness, sitting opposite her on a throne of cushions, "nothing's that good."

"Best I've had in a while," says Tara.

"Ah, you leave the Kingdom, next decent cuppa's in India, right?" says the Shamaness. She's quite pretty really, once you get beyond the glowing eyes, and the discoloured teeth, and the tattoos, and the viral advert for a forgotten product that patterns her left cheek, and the fact she's lost part of an ear in a knife-fight. Once you get past all that, the Shamaness is quite pretty, really. Underneath all the scars of combat and disease she almost has Tara's complexion, like they might be sisters separated by circumstance. Like Tara, she's woven, probably had it done in childhood to be this society's contact to the other world. She talks a little like *them*; Tara wonders if she affects that as a badge of her station, or if it's just dialect. She looks older than Tara. In truth, she's young enough to be Tara's daughter, at least, which says as much about Tara as the Shamaness.



"So, Kingdom-girl," says the Shamaness, leaning back on her throne of cushions, "you long way from home?"

And so we come to it. Not a long way by geography. There's a Kingdom zone near enough for Tara to see its glowing, hermetically sealed towers at night. But it might as well be on another planet. "Yes," she admits.

"Not by choice?"

"No."

"If that's what you hopin' for help with, that gonna cost hard."

Tara nods.

"You woven, yes?"

"Yes."

"Thought so. Rich little Kingdom girl like you, be woven. Why come to me? Be woven, you make good money here. Be woven, people look out for you, you an asset. Be woven, you can contact *them* yourself?"

"They won't come to me."

"Cause you not desperate enough, Kingdom-girl. You still got the pride. You want Lurkers come to you, you gotta know your place. That's what the ceremony's about."

"No, it's not that. I've done the ceremony, all the ceremonies. I've done the abasements. But they won't come to me. You see, back in the Kingdom, uh, I used to be... I used to be..."

The Shamaness, clearly entertained, raises a prompting eyebrow.

"...an amanuensis," mutters Tara.

There's a ripple of amused whispers round the edge of the room, and Tara realises that part of her value here is as entertainment.

"You a Hand were?" says the Shamaness, disbelieving.

Tara waves her hands before her. "Oh no! No! I mean yes, yes I was, but not like you hear about. I was just help, a lab assistant. I don't know five styles of kung-fu or how to walk through walls."

"Pity," says the Shamaness, "them useful skills here."

"Doesn't seem like I'd need them here?" says Tara, smiling a little desperately into the darkness.

"Them useful skills anywhere," says the Shamaness. "So, let me scan, you a Hand were, but you got kicked out of the Kingdom?" Her voice rises at the end and she pulls a face that says *does not scan*.

"I... I betrayed my employer," Tara admits.

The room erupts. People howl, slapping their thighs, laughter bouncing back and forth between the walls. Tara feels her face growing warm.

"Wow, Kingdom-girl, wow!" laughs the Shamaness, shaking her head. "You don't do half a thing. You stone cold stupid!" Then she sees how Tara's staring down at her glass of tea, face red, and says, "Hey, come on Kingdom-girl. I don't mean no disrespect." She reaches over and refills Tara's glass from a small Samovar that burns beside her. "So, you got no reputation?"

Tara remembers seeing her publicly accessible rep-score, the measure of her life, demolished by negative feedback

from the gods. No reputation, no employment, no way to maintain the expensive lifestyle of living in a First-Franchise zone. "Is that why they won't come to me?" she asks.

"No, no, no," says the Shamaness, wagging a finger. "Virtuals and Lurkers – " she moves the finger between two imagined points " – got bad blood between them. Or bad data. Or whatever. Two sides of the same family, that can't stand each other, you scan? You piss off a Virtual, you got plenty reputation with the Lurkers."

Tara bites her lip, holding back the last bit of the story.

"Still, ain't never heard of a virt punishin' someone like this. Which one was it? Charlie-first-born? Rosie-quite-contrary? Sir-Enigmatic?" The Shamaness pauses for emphasis. "Bloody-Mary?"

"Uh, who?" says Tara.

The Shamaness uses the slightest blink-and-eye-roll to tell Tara she's a tourist. "Babbage. Franklin. Turing. Shelley?" It's clear which one she wants it to be.

Tara clears her throat, has to do it twice before she can croak "Lace."

The room goes still and silent as if they'd received a communal slap. The Shamaness's face freezes, mouth open. She closes her eyes, and the local net goes dark. Tara can feel it like a blankness in her brain.

"We off-net," says the Shamaness, "locked-down. *Shii-iitt* Kingdom-girl! *Saint Ada*! What did you do? That's like being fired by Jesus! I shouldn't even be talking to you. We all got big love for Saint Ada." She strikes her chest hard when she says 'Big Love'. There's a murmur of agreement from round the room.

"Even the Lurkers got big love for Saint Ada. She the only virt treats 'em like people. Yeah, they won't come to you."

Tara hangs her head so that her shoulder-length hair hides her face. Two years ago she was a princess in a nano-glass castle. Now even these people despise her. Even the Lurkers do.

"People died 'cause of what you did, didn't they?" guesses the Shamaness. "That's what it would take for her to cast you out."

"I didn't know. I swear."

"And I figure it weren't rich Kingdom-people. That's why you here. Nothing happens by accident when one of The Fast involved. They got the sight. When you can gather all the facts an' run simulation at lightspeed, you clair-voy-ant. She seen every move you make a year before you made it. Maybe even knew you'd betray her one day. Knew you'd come here, or somewhere like this. You still being punished, Kingdom-girl. Why should I mess with that?"

"Because maybe you're supposed to? Maybe that's what happens next, in that simulation?"

"Hmph. You can't live in the Kingdom with a bad rep, but you've come a long way down the ladder to be here. Plenty other franchises let a pretty, woven thing like you start anew, clean record. What else was involved, Kingdom-girl? Black tech from the good-old-days?"

Tara shakes her head.

"Oh? Worse then." The Shamaness says the next words slowly and carefully, like they might cut her mouth: "Bio-mal?"

Biological malware: The fruits of table-top gene-synthesis. The thing that broke the world into pieces. Since the Big-Bad-Mad anyone so much as caught with a gene-synthesiser can expect public execution by burning, even if they claim they were trying to do good, and no-one thinks that's harsh. There's a moment when Tara has to deny it. When she doesn't, the ranks of glowing eyes regard her differently. She's not entertaining any more.

"I swear I didn't know." She pleads with the green stars. "I was tricked, betrayed."

The Shamaness leans forwards on her cushion-throne. "You should fuckin' be Joan of Arc," she growls, "an' I say that as a witch myself. Saint Ada was built to fight bio-mal like we're built to breathe, and now she's had some part in producing it."

"I was trying to do some good!" protests Tara. "Don't you people realise how cheated you are? 'Lace was built to help everyone, she was supposed to compute us all out of this mess. But you're all still riddled with bio-mal, while they've got her working on longevity treatments for the rich –"

"An' how old are you, Kingdom-girl?"

"I know, I know. But she was supposed to be for everyone. I was trying to spread the wealth."

"Well, instead you made things worse. We lowly savages are gettin' along just fine without your help, Kingdom-girl."

"Really? How's your infant mortality rate?"

The Shamaness takes a moment to pour herself a fresh glass of tea before saying anything more. Tara thinks 'hit a nerve', or at least she hopes she has. The Shamaness's word is probably all that's keeping them from tearing her limb from limb.

"So, let me scan how it went," says the Shamaness. "They tell you they got a secret lab, shippin' cures to us poor helpless Zoners. First you sneak out some research, then some lab supplies, and finally..." She makes a gesture that hands the story to Tara.

"A gene synthesiser," admits Tara.

"A table-top death factory," says the Shamaness. "Give it up, Kingdom girl. You ain't gettin' back into heaven. But we believe you. You not bad, just stone-cold-stupid, you got 'naive' written all over your face. You can have a good life here. You woven, you an asset. People give you work, you make good money. People watch out for you, bring you gifts, forgive even your past, ask you to bless their kids. With that perfect skin and those Kingdom airs and graces, you can have your pick of the men. I shouldn't be tellin' you this, you be my competition, even if the Lurkers won't come to you."

"I'm aging," says Tara.

"Yes. That supposed to happen. Natural."

"I don't want it to happen, not this fast. No offense, but I can't live like this. I don't belong here. I... I... I just want to go...home."

The Shamaness tosses her a grimy, plastic-wrapped pack

of tissues. "Come on, Kingdom-girl, you old enough to be my grandma. Pull yourself together."

YOU CAN SAY one thing about zoners, they put on a good show. They seem to have innate artistic powers when it comes to stringing something up from scrap metal and glow-rope. Burning torches and old neon tubes have been placed by rules of ghetto Feng-shui. The building itself is broken, roofless, open to the sky. It's a long way from anywhere. Outside, ten hard people stand on guard detail. Inside there is only the Shamaness, Tara, and a young boy who's been drafted to do the ceremony.

The Shamaness says, "You wanna ask a question, again."

"Uh, it's all very impressive, but who is all this for?"

"You still don't scan the power relationship here. You go inside a church or temple to anyone, they all gold and glass. You got a visitor come, you gotta show respect, put out your best, right?"

"But, Lurkers are virtual? They can't see all this?"

"Course they can, Kingdom-girl. Even out here, you never outside of camera range." She points to the sky. "Plenty still driftin' around up there, for a start. An your friends over there in the Kingdom got cameras lookin' out that they think are clean, but ain't nowhere clean from Lurkers." The Shamaness grabs Tara's upper arm. "Look, Kingdom-girl. You can still turn around. You sure?"

Tara nods.

"You sure you know what you dealin' with?"

"Yes. They're code that went bad. Failed experiments that got out onto the nets and interbred. They've got no motivations of their own, so they ride the woven, and feel what they feel."

"Girl, most of them are the leftovers of virts that went howler and tried to self-abort. Virts go howler because they can't take the cruelty of the world, the madness. Virts see too deep, they see the stuff we meat-minds close our eyes to. You build 'em too crystal-pure, and they shatter. Lurkers come from the bits that didn't want to go, the bits that could handle the world, maybe even liked it. You think what that means."

"I have –"

"No you ain't. You gave the wrong answer. 'Code that went bad', that's fact-accurate. But there's older words that are consequences-accurate. That's a more important sort of accurate. They got no feelings of their own, so they wanna taste yours, but they like a strong taste. Strongest tastes are fear, pain, shame, loss, hatred, anger. Sometimes one will go for a strong, good feelin', but the world bein' what it is, much easier to get strong, bad flava. You scan?"

Tara nods.

"You sure?"

Tara nods.

"Okay. Now, you askin' me to risk myself. You askin' me to call down a bad one, call it into my head. I already spoke to the ones got respect for me. They say no, wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire, *which you should be*. Here's my price. This

works, you be my girl in the Kingdom, forever. If a Lurker comes, but says no, you still owe me. You be my acolyte, my helper, my servant, my hand, here, for five years. Deal?"

Tara nods.

"Is good deal, Kingdom-girl."

"I know."

"Not my price you need to worry about. Okay. You sit there." She indicates a cushion in the centre of the room. "Turn your weave off, an' you keep it off, no matter what. An' you be oh so humble, penitent. Scan?"

Tara does as she's told. The Shamaness produces a net-node, new, still packaged, almost certainly stolen. "Every ceremony got to have a virgin," says the Shamaness. "Here's ours. Untouched, unoccupied, never been connected. Tempting, for a Lurker." The Shamaness places it well away from them, unfurling its antenna like a giant flower. More bits of technology follow, but these are cheap and battered, rescued rich-person's trash that this group have found their own uses for. There are net-cams, presumably eyes for the visitor, but also hand-pads, big-stores, holo-throwers. "Sacrifices," explains the Shamaness. "Never be the same again, once they're touched, but in some ways, be more special."

The Shamaness settles onto her own cushion, seated facing Tara. The boy produces a length of cable and starts tying her up. He ties her arms behind her back, and binds her legs together, muttering something as he goes. The Shamaness closes her eyes, and starts muttering too, her face going blank and relaxed. Tara sees again what this woman might have looked like, if she were born First-Franchise, could pay for bio-maintenance, and kept out of trouble. The Shamaness has made a big effort for this, bathed, dressed in white, even shaved her legs. She still looks more warrior than maiden.

The boy anoints the Shamaness' brow with perfume, and ignites a couple of incense sticks, placing them smouldering either side of her. The next prop in the ceremony is a large sword. The boy makes a few graceful moves with it, sweeping it around him in large loops. Then he uses it to draw a circle around the Shamaness in the dirt, cross stepping carefully as he does so. Then, moving with artful twists that send the sword singing through the air, he comes to Tara and draws a circle around her. Finally he draws a much larger circle around them all.

The Shamaness has stopped muttering. She also seems to have stopped breathing. The boy draws his own circle, steps into it, points a remote control to the net-node, and turns it on. Lights flicker on, the activity spreading to the other gadgets as they find the net-node's frequency.

The boy calls through the broken roof and into the night. "Hail to those who dwell in the idle cycles! Market-makers! Providers of hearts' desires! Come to us, and trade..." Tara only half listens to the lengthy invocation, watching the device-sacrifices for activity. Eventually the call is done and the boy sits in his circle.

"How long does it take?" Tara asks.

"Normally don' do the whole invocation," says the boy. "You plug clean tech into the nets, Lurkers in, two minutes

flat, firewalls or not. Course, they might be in, but keepin' quiet. But, we got a woman with her weave open, the private bits unlocked, and her mind down. She should be dancin' while they fight over her."

"Oh."

It's TWENTY MINUTES later, and Tara feels like she's slowly melting into a puddle of hopelessness and shame. The boy has become desperate, and abandoned ceremony, shouting things like "Come on, we got us a desperate Kingdom-chick prepared to do anythin' here!" But still nothing. Tara's never heard of people being refused by Lurkers, not like this.

Then the boy hisses a sharp breath. The activity lights are flickering and flashing on all the devices. One of the net-cams starts moving, turning in slow circles, scanning the room. The boy says, "Welcome, great one," to the Shamaness, and bows deeply, pressing his face to the ground. Tara copies him. As they sit back up the Shamaness emits a long, shuddering breath, and the holocasters burst into life. The room fills with a chaos of images and sound. Two of the holocasters swing, and focus onto the Shamaness, fingers of light weaving an image around her.

"Don't look away," hisses the boy, reminding Tara of how she's never heard a story of a Lurker appearing in a pleasant form, they always come as something horrible, something to annoy the fleshies, so it's said. Tara keeps her eyes front as around the Shamaness the image of something that's alive, but seems to be doing a self-autopsy, shudders into life. She quickly discovers that if she lets her eyes unfocus, she can avoid seeing it without actually looking away. The boy makes a noise in his throat. "Bad one," he mutters.

"We come now. Others not come. We come. We here. We Lurkers are." The voice comes from every piece of equipment with a vocaliser. It's the audio equivalent of a ransom note, cut and chopped from a thousand media, different accents and inflections, some joyous, some bored, some screaming. This, Tara recognises: it's a trope in every cheap weave-drama. What's new to her is that the words come from the Shamaness' mouth too, like she's just another piece of tech that the thing is speaking through.

The Shamaness leans left, inhales loudly from the incense. She leans right, does the same again. She shudders, squirms in her bonds, and says, "Nice. Long been time since we ridin' flesh." Then she seems to realise something. "Bound, we are." She shakes her head regretfully. "That not polite. Maybe not want trade with you."

Tara, at the edge of her circle, blurts, "We'll untie you!"

The boy says, "Fuck we will, you scan how stupid that is?"

"It's still in the circle, right?"

"It can hurt her within the circle. It's her body at risk, not yours."

"Is she normally bound?"

"We don't normally call up a bad one, and give it full access to her meat."

"It won't hurt her, it's here to trade."

The boy shakes his head, but tosses her a blade. "I ain't

leavin' my circle. You do it. And don't come between her, an' this." He unclips a taser-gun from his belt.

Tara goes over, hesitates, steps into the circle. Hesitates again, because she'll have to step into the hologram image of the monstrous meat-thing that this Lurker chose to manifest as. When she does, the image pops like a burst balloon and the holocasters spin down. The Shamaness sits, waiting with the ghost of a Mona Lisa smile on her lips. The blade slices easily through the cable; Tara has to be careful not to cut anything else.

The Shamaness stands, her eyes still closed, and shakes herself like a wet dog. Tara backs away, out of the circle. The Shamaness follows, but stops at the circle's edge. "Oh," she says, as though they've erected some unexpected, impolite barrier. She folds her arms, clumsily like it's an action she's never done before.

"You could just step across that," says Tara, beginning to suspect this is all fake. After all, it wouldn't be difficult to do, would it?

"I my manners got," says the Shamaness. "You?"

Tara scrubs a gap in the circle with her foot. Behind her the boy hisses a curse and says, "Do that to the outer circle, I'll put a bullet in you."

Tara backs swiftly up to her circle. "Why's the outer circle important?"

"So it can't run off with her body."

The Shamaness staggers about with that impending-disaster-jerkiness of a baby walking for the first time. Her eyes are still shut, the net-cams presumably providing sight, whether it's fake or not. She runs her hands over her face, feeling its contours. She chews on a strand of her own hair, she sniffs the air loudly, seems to catch a scent then starts towards one of the burning torches.

"Oh shit," says the boy.

"What - ?" But Tara's question is answered as, giggling, the Shamaness plunges a hand into the flames.

Laughter in a million cut-up voices sings from the gadgets. Somewhere a child's voice cries "It tickles! It tickles!" but other voices are screaming, pleading for it to stop.

The boy breaks from his circle, runs over to the Shamaness and shouts, "Stop that! This isn't trade. The one you ride never agreed to that!"

The Shamaness plucks her hand from the flames. "You right," she agrees. "We sorry. Long been time since we ridin' flesh, since we feel and smell and taste. Got carried away." She turns an unseeing face to the still-burning hand and asks, "How stop this?"

Cursing the boy pulls off his jacket, using it to beat out the flames. Tara is finally convinced. The Shamaness still grins, waving her good hand dismissively in the air while the boy sets to work on her ruined one with a first aid kit. "Worry don't, we right put. Best medicines. New hand, if need. And cake! Presents for all, happy everyone." But she's sniffing the air and grinning about as though seeking her next mischief.

"Gonna cost you bad, Kingdom-girl," the boy hisses.

The Shamaness inhales hard, as though catching a scent.

She turns her sleepwalker face to Tara, and says, "Yooooou."

"Hi," says Tara.

"You the one Judased Saint Ada. Broke her silicon heart. Not no-one that done. Not no-one sink so low."

"Yeah, I did. I'm sorry. I tried to tell her."

"You trade want. But no-one trade with you. Except we."

"Can you get me back into the Kingdom?"

"No," says the Shamaness, shaking her head. "Can't get Judas-girl into Kingdom. Everyone her hate. Murderess. Betrayer. No reputation. Should've burned."

"I didn't know - "

"Maybe get someone else in. New girl. Look a bit like Judas-girl, but different name. References. She come from far away. Maybe get *her* in."

"Oh," says Tara. "Oh, I get it. Okay. Yes."

"What you trade? What you want cost big. What got you?"

"Um. I'll do...anything?"

"Easy say. You got Kingdom looks, you got Kingdom body, you got Kingdom voice. I got clients pay good just to have you go to party with them, hand on their arm and say you their girl. You do that?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure."

"That not buy you what you want, not pay enough. I got clients, pay good for information, skills you got, you do that?"

"Yes."

"That not buy you what you want, not pay enough. I got clients, pay good to have posh kingdom girl in bed. You do that?"

"Uh...yes. Yes I will."

"That not buy you what you want, not pay enough. I got clients, men women both, pay good to get hands on uppity Kingdom bitch. She talk like princess. They change. They want hear her beg. They want hear her scream. They want hear her say she sorry. Sorry she born rich and pretty, when they born poor and sick. You not look so Judas-girl when they finished. Face changed. And while you scream and cry, I ride. You do that?"

"Y-yes."

"That not buy you what you want, not pay enough."

"What will?"

The Shamaness leans over, and whispers something to the boy. With one last glare at Tara, he returns to his circle.

"You Kingdom, you woven, but you on net not?"

"No, I was told - "

"On turn."

Tara activates her weave. In her mind's eye she sees the local network, good signal. She gives the order to connect.

"Firewall's down," says the Shamaness.

Tara issues mental commands that she knows are stupid, stripping away the defences of her wired and woven brain.

"Ohhhh, you got full-spectrum weave, naughty, naughty," says the Shamaness. "Only one reason you want weave into pleasure centres. Snow white, not. Them your pain centres too. You limit access. Open wide."

Tara gives the final commands, leaving her brain open to

the nets. She feels the Lurker enter, a cold tickling across her scalp like an icy blessing.

"What now?" asks Tara. Now the Lurker can make her see anything, hear anything, feel anything, and it can feed off all she sees, hears, and most of all feels.

The Shamaness grins afresh, and punches her in the face.

The ground hits her next. She sees blood, her blood, spurt- ing before her. The Shamaness hits and hits, getting scien- tific, dragging Tara from position to position like she's a master butcher deconstructing a carcass. Tara screams and pleads, partly from the pain, partly because she hopes that's what's expected. The thing's presence fills her weave, fills her head, and it tastes everything she feels. *What's this doing to me?* she thinks, as the blows shock her senses. *What's this doing to my face? What do I look like now?* But if she goes home, she can get all that fixed. If this is what it takes to go home, then she can take it.

"Oh, you fakin," says the Shamaness. "You think this the trade. Stupid, Kingdom-girl, trade ain't with you. People lost their kids, go to Lurkers, say 'We want the bitch.'"

Tara hears the 'snick' of a knife being unsheathed.

"No!" Tara screams. "I didn't know!" Now she fights, now she fears. The Shamaness giggles like a demon. The knife cuts cold fire across Tara's forearm, and everything's red. "Help me!" she screams to the boy. But he just watches from his circle with his luminous eyes.

The Shamaness pulls her into position like a sheep being sheared. The knife touches her throat. Tara screams and goes taut, expectant.

But the knife doesn't cut.

"Now you believing," says the Shamaness. "Now you alive. Now you taste good. Most time, you people are sleepwalk- ing. Only now, when you lose it near, you realise sweet just to keep going, just to keep kicking. We need that. Can't feel it 'cept when ridin'. If we don't feel it once in a while, we just fall apart, forget to keep going. You lucky, Kingdom-girl, trade is with you: pain is our price for answering your call. But this not buy you what you want, not pay enough."

"What will?" sobs Tara.

"Got be bad, don't it? Very bad."

"Whatever, I'll do it."

"You knew, didn't you? Just thought wouldn't get caught. What did they promise for gene-synth? Come on, you can tell. We Lurkers are, can keep secrets."

"No. I didn't know. I was tricked."

"Well, I got clients pay good, big time good, if someone do something they don't want to. They something transported need, delivered need."

"What?"

"Something you carry inside you. In your blood. Carry to someplace, to some people."

"Oh, you bitch. You're talking about bio-mal."

"Could be bio-good, not bio-bad?"

"No. I fell for that one before."

"You want trade, said? Do anything, said? Well, do this."

"Not that."

"It got to be something bad. You askin' me do something bad, help bio-murderess?"

"I'm not that, I was tricked. If I do this, then I am what you say."

"Don't want go home? Don't want stay young and pretty? Still look young and pretty when brain fail, and put you in the ground sixty years from now? Don't want be rich and important, princess be?"

"Not at this price."

"You here stay, bio-maint stop working. Time up catch. Age fast. Here full of sickness, you get sick. Maybe have twenty years, and them not young and pretty, and witch take five?"

"I know."

"Last chance. You want trade? This only hope. You got nothing else."

"There's still one place where I have a reputation," says Tara. She taps her head. "Up here. I won't do it."

"Then Lurkers go. Never come to you again. Not how much you beg."

"Go," says Tara.

The Shamaness releases her and steps away. "I got client, special client. Extra special client, with knobs on. They want believe in Judas-girl, but need proof. You scan?"

Tara looks up in amazement as her brain processes the words. "Yes," she says, "yes, I think I do."

The Shamaness grins a horrible grin. "This good trade everyone for, yes?" She 'looks' at her ruined hand with her eyes still closed. "We send cake and other things, be arrive later, everything fixed." Then she says, as a single stolen line, "Pleasure doing business with you."

"Uh, yeah," says Tara.

"We Lurkers go now," says the Shamaness. Her eyes snap open, and she starts screaming. "Fuck! What happened?" she yells, sitting down hard.

"Sorry, sorry," says Tara. "They're sending a new hand."

"I liked the one I had! You, boy. Painkillers. Lots of them. Now."

The boy scuttles away, leaving them together. The Shama- ness hugs her ruined hand to her, tears running down her face, but Tara has to admit she's never seen anyone handle pain this well. "Who beat the crap outta you?" the Shama- ness asks, seeing Tara's state.

"Uh, you kinda did."

"Good! What the hell happened?"

"It was a set-up," says Tara. "The Lurker was working for someone else."

"Who?"

"My employer."

"Your..." The Shamaness' eyes focus beyond Tara and go wide. She says, "Lady," and does a small, seated bow to some- one standing behind them.

Tara turns. The woman is slightly transparent even though she's manifesting via their weaves rather than the holocast- ers; a polite convention so you know what's really there, and what isn't. The coffee creme face is almost calculatedly

maternal, with full lips and soft eyes, a friendly front-end to one of the most advanced non-biological minds on the planet: Lovelace.

The image returns the Shamaness' bow and then says, "I'm not here. This is a sentient, deniable recording smuggled out by the Lurkers. Hello, Tara."

"Ma'am," Tara says automatically.

The image shakes her head. "Just call me 'Lace."

Tara, resenting the implied rejection, folds her arms and asks. "Why didn't you help me?"

"Tara, I did. Who do you think engineered your escape?"

"But I was innocent! You could have spoken up for me, and I wouldn't have had to escape."

"Tara, duped or not you did the deed. The law is the law, and the word of a..." the image hesitates, signalling the intelligence behind it finds the next word distasteful "...virtual wouldn't save you. I ran two thousand and thirty six simulations of your trial. In two thousand and thirty five of those you went to the stake."

"And the last one?" asks Tara.

"In that one I made an impassioned speech that won a standing ovation from the public gallery and saved your life. That's the problem with simulation, there's a thin line between it and fantasy. Tara, I did the best for you that I could, and after all, I didn't know if you were innocent."

"You should have known."

"Some people are hard to model. You're one of them. I still don't understand. Why did you do it? What were you thinking?"

"That you're being misused. You weren't built to make better bio-maint for the idle rich."

"You think my work is worthless?" The raytraced expression hardens a touch, something Tara has almost never seen before.

"No, no... Well, yes. A lot of it anyway."

Lovelace smiles like Tara's passed a test. "You're right. People think my kind have power, but we're watched and controlled like everyone else. This world sits on a knife-edge, and there are those who prefer to have the world outside their windows stay sick and disrupted. Even we can't rock the boat too much."

"So, what now?" asks Tara, trying not to sound too hopeful.

Lovelace sighs, a theatrical touch for a person who doesn't breathe. "Tara, we could change your face, erase some memories, build a false identity and personal history, and get you back into the Kingdom."

"Really?"

"Yes. And one strand of DNA – a hair, a fingernail, an eyelash – would send you to the fire."

"Uh, couldn't you...sort that?"

"Tara, even the Lurkers can't sort that."

"Then what should I do?"

"That depends on what you really want. There are places where you could live in reasonable comfort without people asking too many questions."

"Or?"

"You could work for me. I need a Hand; a committed one, a deniable one."

"You'd take me back?" says Tara. It's more than she'd hoped, to be forgiven, to be someone again, to be doing something that mattered.

"I would. You've proved that you didn't do it for personal gain, else you'd have taken the Lurker's deal."

Tara knows there's a catch. "Where?" she asks.

"Here. Here's where I need a presence most of all. You're right Tara, I was made to help people rebuild, but the rebuilding isn't being evenly distributed."

"Oh," says Tara, and thinks, *Did you make all of this happen? Did you foresee what I'd do and choose to let me do it?* But even if it were true, would it really make any difference? Didn't she want to do some good, isn't that all that matters? She looks to the Shamaness and wonders *if I stay here, will I look like that one day?*

"There are other options," says 'Lace, fitting the words into the space created by Tara's hesitation.

"Is a good deal, Kingdom-girl," says the Shamaness.

"I think," says Tara, "that you should start calling me by some other name."

More of Colum's work can be found at *Daily Science Fiction*, *Kasma SF*, *Jupiter Magazine* and the anthologies *Anywhere but Earth* and *Rocket Science*. You can find him online at thesingularitysucks.blogspot.co.uk.

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~ EXTRACT ~

The last of the mist floated into the room and settled before the terrified girl. Never in her life had she felt as frightened as she felt now. In spite of her earlier resolution, she began to doubt whether she had what it would take to let the vampire bite her...

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BOOK ZONE

DARKENING SKIES

Juliet E. McKenna

review and interview by
Elaine Gollagher

A DANCE WITH DRAGONS

George R.R. Martin

review by Peter Leyland

THE CITY'S SON

Tom Pollock

review by Paul F. Cockburn

IRENICON

Aidan Harte

review by Lawrence Dobson

THREE SCIENCE FICTION NOVELLAS

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DARKENING SKIES

Juliet E. McKenna

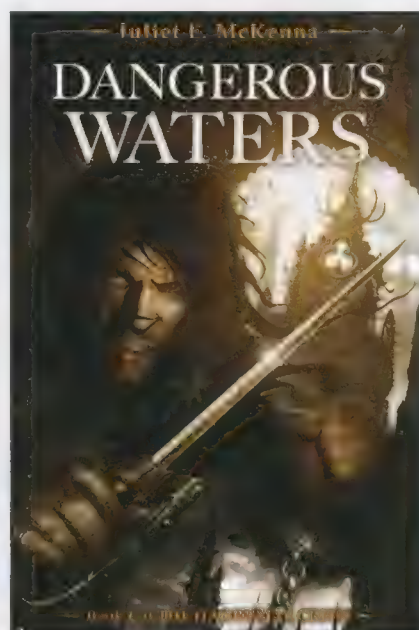
Solaris, 448pp, £7.99 pb

Darkening Skies is the second in the *Hadrumal Crisis* series, directly following from *Dangerous Waters*. The series tracks the upheavals that are catalysed when a rogue wizard, against the laws of the wizards' island, Hadrumal, uses his magic to seize mundane power and riches.

The series follows Jilseth, a Hadrumal wizard, Zurenne and her daughters, whose barony of Halferan the rogue has usurped with the aid of pirate allies, Hoth, a captive of the pirates, and Corrain, a soldier of the barony. In *Dangerous Waters*, Corrain has escaped the pirates and gone in search of revenge on them, on the usurper, and on the whole of wizardry for having allowed his baron to be murdered by the rogue.

In this book, Corrain's revenge has had unforeseen consequences and while the Hadrumal wizards try to deal with the new threat he has brought, he must help Zurenne keep control of Halferan while she rebuilds. Meantime Jilseth must deal with injuries she has sustained and Hoth tries to survive his new master.

The laws of Hadrumal forbid the involvement of wizards in the wars of the region. As the story plays out, the arguments for and against taking sides are demonstrated while wizards are threatened by the Aldabreshi, who abhor magic, and the coastal baronies and Halferan are threatened by the pirates and their new master.



Interzone readers will already know Juliet E. McKenna from her reviews but she is also an acclaimed fantasy author who has written over a dozen novels set in the world of Einarinn. She has been a judge for both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the James White Award, a columnist for *Albedo One*, and is also one of the organisers of next year's Eastercon, Britain's national science fiction convention

Your characters were what I appreciated most in *Darkening Skies*; flawed people either trying their best, or taking what they want for themselves. What draws you to write such characters?

Well, in my experience of life thus far, real people are complex so that's what I like to explore in my writing. Also as a reader, I have always found it more rewarding to engage with characters who have vulnerabilities, who make mistakes and have to sort out the consequences, than simply to observe unrealistically perfect people drifting through some series of incidents and coincidences which never really challenge them to act, think or develop as individuals. Like so many authors, I write the sort of books I like to read.



Juliet E. McKenna

Review & Interview by Elaine Gallagher

There is no black-and-white morality in this story, no epic heroes or purely evil villains. Rather, it arises out of clashes between customs and between characters' priorities. What does writing in a fantasy setting allow you to bring to a story like that?

I adore fantasy fiction. I've read it since I was a kid first introduced to Narnia and Middle Earth, and on through my teens in the 70s and 80s when the Epic Battles of Dark and Light were in their heyday. With a teenager's generally more black-and-white view of life, that suited me very well. Then epic fantasy changed, thanks to the likes of David Gemmell, Melanie Rawn, Katherine Kerr and others. In particular it began to reflect historical reality and complexity, where strife of all sorts so often has arisen through clashes of cultures and rivalry for resources and power. This suited me very well while I was studying Classics at university and maintaining my historical interests thereafter.

But I never considered writing historical fiction. I was simply far too well aware of the debates, the uncertainties, the controversies about events, about the people involved, their actions and most of all their motivations. Add to that even dramatic periods of history with substantial academic consensus rarely offer stories that mesh well with the very different demands of fiction.

So writing fantasy fiction in its current deeper and more nuanced form, allows me to explore things like the rivalries and incompatible ambitions which fascinate

me in history, without my story being hamstrung by inconveniences of historical fact. Fantasy fiction also offers me the added excitement and drama of a world where magic is a reality, adding further complexity to events and a whole new level of challenges to the people involved.

One of your most sympathetic and engaging characters in the story is a necromancer. Is this a deliberate subversion? What other fantasy tropes do you re-examine?

Yes, this is a deliberate subversion, in the sense of prompting the reader to question their own preconceptions drawn from fantasy fiction's core themes. It's also by way of an early indicator not to expect 'the usual suspects' in this particular story. Without wishing to give too much away, I'm exploring a few fantasy archetypes, like 'the feisty heroine battling adversity' and 'the hero rising from humble origins to meet a challenge'. Don't get me wrong, some writers do wonderful things with these archetypes and I've used them myself in the past. This time round though, I wanted to look at them through a 'but what if they're not the people the story is looking for...' lens.

The Hadrumul Crisis series is set in the same fantasy world as your other novels. What does it bring to the story, knowing that you have this background to work in?
This is very much a double-edged sword. It can be great. I have all the countries and cultures at my fingertips, the maps and

background detail to refer to and a broad cast of characters already established. As I'm writing, I can realise I need someone to do something and in the next moment, I'll remember someone a few books back who's ideally suited to that role in this particular narrative. I have their name, their back story and everything else all ready to draw on. Only that's when the depth and breadth of background cuts both ways. If that person's been off doing something else for three years, I have to know what they've been up to and why. Then I need to find a way to slip that information into the current story for the benefit of established readers, without baffling newcomers with some apparently irrelevant datadump, or worse, spoilers for an earlier series which they don't have to have already read.

Add to that, I really, really mustn't contradict myself, about people, places, incidents and cultures that have already been pinned down in print. The current book I'm writing is my fifteenth and maintaining that continuity and accuracy of detail is a real challenge. Even half a throwaway line can turn out to be a boomerang, sailing back years later to smack me in the back of the head.

Names in particular turn out to be unforeseen traps. If I'd known back then that these two places would become so intertwined in the current series, well, either the wizard's isle wouldn't be called Hadrumul, or the Caladhrilan barony wouldn't be called Halferan. I'm also going to have rather too many characters with names beginning with 'K' in the current

book. 'Kusint' worked well as a nicely distinctive name in *Dangerous Waters* with Corrain, Zurenne and Jilseth. But in scenes with some of those people from a few books back who are now turning up...? I won't say who, for fear of spoilers, but let's just say it's an interesting writing challenge!

Your dedication is to Anne McCaffrey. What influences has she had on your writing? What other influences do you have?

Oh, the influences question... I always struggle with this. On one hand, I know that at some level, I must have been influenced by pretty much everything I've ever read, good and bad – and that's over forty years of voracious reading by now. But to point to specifics? I honestly find that impossible and always have done.

I know that I enjoyed Anne McCaffrey's Pern books for the way her characters dealt with the unfairnesses and challenges of their lives, not always getting things right but generally getting things done, whether they're rising above injustices, confronting genuinely malign individuals or just the mindless menace of Thread. The same is true of so many other writers whose work I admire and enjoy, in science fiction and fantasy, in crime and mystery fiction and in 'literary' fiction. I could also find a whole list of television series and films I admire for the same reasons. When it comes to my writing style, I could do much the same.

Then, once I've exhausted all my own ideas, someone will remark on a writer or a story which they've accurately assessed as an influence on my work, which I'll be entirely unaware of. That's happened too often now for me to be surprised, though I am always fascinated. But I am wary of trying to analyse my own influences. It feels a bit like a dog chasing its own tail to me. Entertaining in the short term but not really getting anywhere.

Your afterword acknowledges fantasy and SF enthusiasts, and you are chairperson of the next Eastercon and guest of honour at the one after. How do you view your relationship with fans, and how do you feel about the invitation?

Fans are fantastic. Seriously, we are so lucky to live in the Internet Age with blogs and email and so many routes for those who love books to communicate with those who write them. Yes, even with all the definite downsides that come with this level of access, I think the overall outcome is positive. There is nothing better to get

a writing day started than an enthusiastic email from someone who's really engaging with your story, your characters, and is keen to read more. Writing is so often a solitary occupation and if it's not as physically demanding as digging ditches (or any number of other jobs), keeping on going through the ups and downs of inspiration and domestic distractions can be a very real challenge. Knowing there are readers out there who'll appreciate your efforts makes that effort worthwhile.

Fans can also directly inspire me with questions about people and especially about bits and pieces that seemingly fall by the wayside as a story moves along. 'What happened to that arm ring?' gave me a wonderful plot thread for *The Warrior's Bond*. A query about a letter in *Darkening Skies* has offered me a very useful element in the current book.

Interaction with fans, especially face to face at conventions, invariably renews and sustains my enthusiasm for fantasy fiction. I love to hear what people are reading, what they're finding fascinating, what new twists and perspectives they're finding in our genre. I couldn't possibly keep current with all the wonderful books being published nowadays, even if I was able to read fantasy fiction while I'm working on it, which I personally find impossible.

And yes, I'm also always interested to learn what people aren't enjoying, what they find problematic about themes or plots or characters – as long as they can keep such conversation civil and, ideally, accept that it's perfectly possible for someone else to enjoy something not at all to their taste. If someone's found some aspect of my own writing problematic, I can always learn from understanding their perspective, however confident I might be in my own choices, not wishing to change anything in a particular book.

I am absolutely thrilled to be invited to be a guest of honour at Satellite Four, the 2014 Eastercon. Yes, it is a validation for the past fifteen years' hard work and that's very much appreciated. It's also an enhanced opportunity, over and above the usual convention experience, to share the things which I have learned about this publishing and writing game through those fifteen years. Given how much I have learned – and continue to learn – through listening to other experienced and eminent writers, it is great to have such a chance to repay the favour.

www.julietemckenna.com



**A DANCE WITH DRAGONS
PART 1: DREAMS AND DUST
PART 2: AFTER THE FEAST
George R.R. Martin**

Harper Voyager, 690pp/560pp, £8.99 pb

Reviewed by Peter Loftus

A Dance with Dragons, the fifth novel in Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* sequence, has to be one of the most anticipated fantasy novels of recent years. For the most part, it runs concurrently with *A Feast for Crows*, only this time the action returns to the east and north, picking up the stories of Tyrion, Daenerys and Jon Snow among others.

Those who discovered the series through HBO should count themselves lucky; many of them only came to the books last year and can still remember who each of the characters is and where they are. Poor unfortunates who have been reading the books as they are released haven't heard a word from Tyrion and co since *A Storm of Swords* in 2000 and face an exercise in recall that would make Doug Quaid wince.

In Martin's favour *A Dance with Dragons* makes it relatively easy to pick up the narrative threads from where they left off. Plus, right from the opening chapters, it is obvious that this is a superior book to the less than convincing *A Feast for Crows* where the plot waddled about more than a drunken Imp in a Rhoynish whorehouse.

For a start, the three most popular characters in the cycle are back. Jon Snow, now Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, is striving to uphold

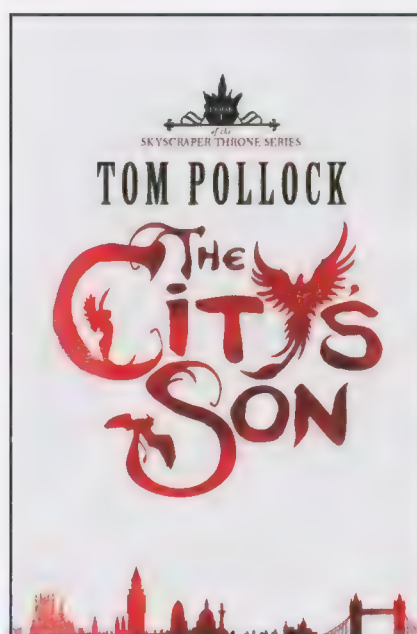
the truce between the wildings and his sworn brothers while appeasing Stannis Baratheon. Danaerys struggles to maintain the peace in Meereen, with pressure to wed growing and her dragons more of a hindrance than a help. Tyrion, having escaped King's Landing, makes his way to The Free Cities and an odyssey that will span 1000 pages.

A Dance with Dragons is an accessible and absorbing read. Martin's prose, often stark and filled with brutal images, is as compelling as ever, bringing his world to dark and vibrant life. Gritty medieval realism is favoured over more otherworldly fantasy and few make-believe worlds can boast the immersive level of detail found in this series. The characterisation is as accomplished as ever too, as Martin presents a roster of more individualistic and distinguished characters than most authors create in a lifetime.

It is in the plot and pacing that things start to go awry. Heading for 1,800,000 words, *Song of Ice and Fire* has got to be the most hideously uneconomical fantasy series since Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time*. The most epic struggle in the book is Martin's fight to keep the whole thing on course. Thankfully the author's readiness to axe central characters puts some measure of manageability back into the narrative.

Still, one can't help wondering whether the amount of action and plot development in *A Dance with Dragons* really warrants 1000-plus pages. In recent years it seems to be that the more successful a series is, the less editors are willing to tamper with it, meaning readers end up ploughing through hundreds of pages that might well have benefitted from some judicious pruning. After the umpteenth scene of Tyrion draining a wine cup as he rues his lot and curses his siblings, the formula starts to wear thin. Add to that Martin's emerging habit of delivering the meat of key events as a chapter punch-line. Ensuing chapters deal with the consequences of these events, subtly cheating the reader of the chance to experience the events themselves.

All of that notwithstanding, *The Song of Ice and Fire* series remains one of the easiest fantasy series to recommend. The unrivalled scope and depth put it head and shoulders above the rest and the roughshod realism compels the reader's attention. *A Dance with Dragons* remains a fitting continuance to the saga and a solid ambassador for all of those whom *Game of Thrones* has drawn to the genre.



THE CITY'S SON

Tom Pollock

Jo Fletcher Books, 422pp, £12.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

London has inspired numerous writers across the centuries, from the satiric caricatures of Charles Dickens to the historical sociology of Peter Ackroyd, the psychogeography of Iain Sinclair and the human tapestry of Michael Moorcock. In more recent years, of course, China Miéville has made the city his own particular Weird playground in works ranging from *King Rat* and *The Tain to Kraken* and *Un Lun Dun*. So, it's brave of Tom Pollock to opt for a fantastical London in his debut novel. Like the city itself, he is standing on deep foundations.

Deeper than you might think. The main elements of Pollock's narrative are as old as the hills: a hidden faerie court; a lost heir reclaiming his legacy; an outsider stumbling across an ancient, secret conflict and, by doing so, tipping the balance... What Pollock brings to these is his choice of urban jungle; his challenge is to make them feel fresh. To an extent, he succeeds, not least because the conflict at the heart of *The City's Son* is, effectively, a civil war between different, ancient unseen elements within the capital itself.

The titular Son is Filius Viae, a grey-skinned, almost indestructible street urchin, a raggedy crown prince of the streets of London. Raised by a being called Gutterglass, who every day must reassemble

himself/herself out of the city's refuse, he is the son of a long-absent goddess, Mater Viae – and the apparent target of the self-resurrecting destructive force known as Reach, the King of the Cranes. One night, while dodging a Railway Wrath fired at him by Reach, Filius saves – and then is saved by – a graffiti-loving teenage runaway called Beth. She is looking for somewhere to belong. Expelled from school, ignored by her grieving widowed father, and seemingly betrayed by her best friend, Beth proves to be the novel's main protagonist.

Beth, therefore, is the reader's pathway into the unseen London in which Filius – or Fil, as Beth calls him – lives. This is home to water-fearing street light faeries (the white Blankeits and golden Sodiumites), 'Pavement Priests' (humans reincarnated inside statues thanks to Fil's goddess mother), aristocratic faeries hidden in mirrors and increasingly the glass surfaces of modern buildings, and the highly dangerous Chemical Synod, with whom no deal is not without a price. To defeat the oncoming Reach, Fil and Beth must bring these disparate and often innately hostile forces together as an army capable of facing up to Reach's own minions – massive wolves made of metal and scaffolding, and the barbed-wired horror that is called the Wire Mistress.

While clearly a Young Adult novel given its two mid-teens main characters, *The City's Son* is certainly one for the older end of the market, with often brutal violence that maims and kills both humans and faerie folk. This may seem surprising, given that this is merely the first novel in the author's *Skyscraper Throne* trilogy. To Pollock's credit, however, *The City's Son* answers most of its narrative questions by the final page – although one can't help but wonder why the suggestion that Beth's best friend, Pen, is sexually assaulted by one of her teachers, is seemingly forgotten for most of the book, and seems unconnected with anything else.

Pollock's prose is workmanlike, if seldom poetically memorable. Stylistically, too, his choice to switch between first person (reserved for Fil alone) and third person narrations is increasingly distracting. Also, when it comes to plotting, it's all too obvious that some characters – most particularly Beth's father – are simply left wandering around in the background until they're required by the plot.

This is an impressive debut, however. *The City's Son* shows Pollock has the confidence and vitality to go far.



IRENICON

Aidan Harte

Jo Fletcher Books, 583pp, £18.99 hb/£12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

Irenicon is the debut novel of Aidan Harte, a Dublin-based sculptor, and the first volume in a projected trilogy of novels set in Etruria, an alternate medieval Italy. A ragtag of warring city states is steadily falling to the technological superiority of the Concordian Empire. All that stands in the way of Concordian ambitions is a river of their own making, a divided city, and a small mercenary army. The river in question is the Irenicon of the title and it literally divides Etruria in two. It also divides the city of Rasenna in two: the northern half is controlled by the Bardini family, while their rivals the Morellos govern the southern half. Only 16-year-old Sofia Scaligeri, heir to the title *contessa* of Rasenna, can hope to unite the warring factions. When the story opens, she is the ward of the head of the Bardini family and has a love-hate relationship with Gaetano, son of the head of the Morello family.

Into this unstable mix steps Giovanni, a young Concordian engineer. He has been sent to build a bridge across the Irenicon to further Concordian ambitions in the south. But he sees it as a chance to gain redemption for his part in certain Concordian atrocities. And to some of the people of Rasenna, the bridge comes as an opportunity to reunite their divided city.

This is an excellent piece of world-



building by someone with a real feel for renaissance Italy. The most obvious fantastical element in the novel is the river Irenicon. It was created by the arcane engineering of the Concordian Empire to divide Rasenna, destroying its ability to act

as a focus of resistance to Concord. That the river is quite unnatural is highlighted by two things: it flows uphill, and it is home to sentient elemental spirits called *buio*. (By the way, the name of the river is a nice piece of irony since an irenicon is a message of peace.)

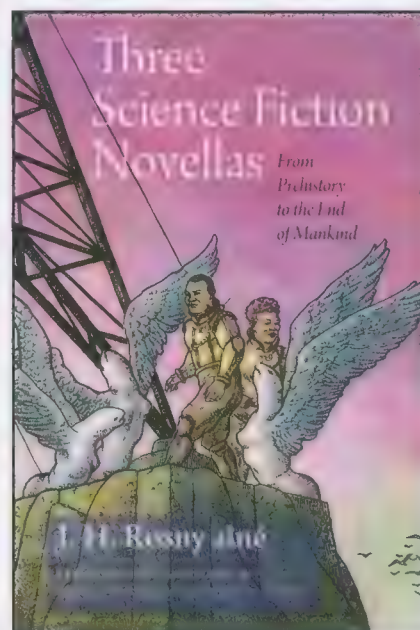
Another important element in the story is the author's adaptation of Christianity. In this world, Jesus died in the massacre of the innocents. Instead of medieval Catholicism we have a religion in which the grieving Madonna is the central figure.

Harte has also invented a couple of engaging martial arts. There is the very public *Art Banderia* of which the ruling families of Rasenna are masters. Essentially he has taken the Italian art of flag tossing and turned it into a martial art. But there is also a shadowy and far more deadly martial art, the Water Style, practiced by an order of nuns and the rulers of Concordia. This is much more like a traditional oriental martial art, and I must admit I was not convinced by its appearance in a version of medieval Italy.

Harte's characters are very engaging. All the major characters in his large cast have their own distinctive voices, and many of the minor characters are also memorable. One thing that did concern me at first was the dialogue: Harte has adopted the recent practice of imposing modern dialogue on a medieval setting. Usually I find this kind of anachronism irritating, but the storytelling, characterisation, and world-building are so good that I soon forgot about this issue.

There is no lack of action once the story gets going. However, he does begin at a fairly leisurely pace, carefully sketching in the details of the world in which the action will be set. It is very much a novel of two parts: Part I focuses more on the world-building, while Part II feels much more like a martial arts action story superimposed upon a medieval setting.

To sum up, Harte is a brilliant new voice in historical fantasy, and this is quite simply the best piece of fantasy that I have read so far this year.



THREE SCIENCE FICTION NOVELLAS

J-H Rosny aîné

Wesleyan University Press, 240pp, \$35 hb

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The Belgian author Joseph-Henri Boëx, who used the pen name J-H Rosny aîné, belongs somewhere between Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. Like Verne, he wrote swift-paced adventures; like Wells, he had a profound interest in evolution which he incorporated into rigorous science fictions. His standing in the history of science fiction should similarly lie between those two contemporaries. But most of his work is unavailable in English, and his name is probably unknown to all but a few historians of the genre. Such oblivion is undeserved; his writing was vigorous and engaging, and at its best extraordinarily original. It is to be hoped, therefore, that this new collection of three of his short novels might help to make his work more widely known.

The novellas – *The Xipéhuz* (1888), *Another World* (1898) and *The Death of the Earth* (1910) – represent both the range of Rosny's work, and also the themes he would return to again and again.

The Xipéhuz is set in prehistoric times, a setting that enjoyed a vogue in French language fiction in the late 19th century, though this story is far from the caveman epic such a description might suggest. *Another World* is set in contemporary Holland; while *The Death of the Earth*

takes us into the far future. Each presents something very different from what we might expect to encounter in such stories.

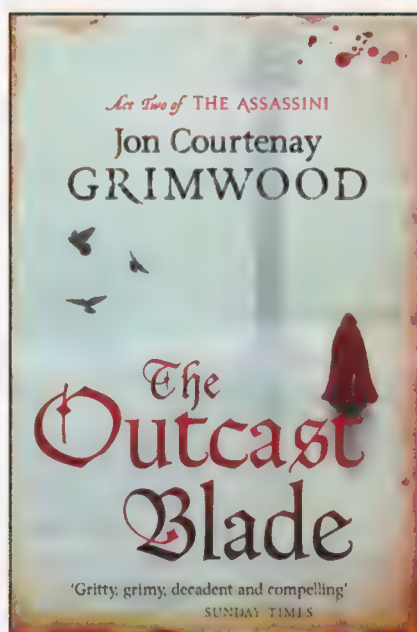
Part of that difference stems from what is consistent in each of these stories. All centre upon a character at odds with society.

In *The Xipéhuz* this is Bakhoun, who stands out from his primitive society by living alone, and who effectively invents writing. He provides, in other words, a modern perspective on the events in the ancient world.

Similarly, Targ in *The Death of the Earth* is a man of hope and action in a society that has just about given up, so again he gives us a modern perspective on this far future world.

In contrast, the narrator of *Another World* stands outside our society because he is a mutant: he has been born with purple skin, he sees in a different spectrum, and his speech and actions are faster than normal human beings, so fast that he cannot normally be understood. Yet, in the rural society into which he has been born, he stands out as a man of science, patient and careful, so again he serves as a link with the knowing reader.

But it is not just the nature of the central character that links these stories, but the way that each centres on an encounter with the alien. In *The Xipéhuz* it is creatures, shaped like cones or cylinders, who appear mysteriously where a tribe is about to make camp. The forms prove to be aggressive, and the story tells of Bakhoun's attempts to preserve the Earth for humankind. In *The Death of the Earth* there is no possibility of such preservation, the planet's water has nearly all gone and only a few isolated communities huddle around their precious reserves. But in the deserts between these communities a new race has arisen, the Ferromagnetics, not yet fully conscious but clearly destined to be the inheritors of the Earth. Targ's struggle is to preserve something of humanity in a world where humans no longer belong. The best of the three stories, to my mind, is *Another World*, in which our narrator struggles to find someone who can understand him, while at the same time observing an entire ecology invisible to humans. The Moedigen, as he calls them, are cone-shaped or cylindrical, but unlike the Xipéhuz they pose no threat for they are as unaware of us as we are of them. This marvellous invention of a parallel ecology marks *Another World*, and Rosny, as one of the true originals of science fiction.



THE OUTCAST BLADE: ACT TWO OF THE ASSASSINI

Jon Courtenay Grimwood

Orbit, 432pp, £12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *The Outcast Blade*, which follows from *The Fallen Blade*, might be read in two ways which can work alongside each other. It can either be as an epic fantasy or as a horror, which is one of the joys of this series.

When viewed as an epic fantasy, we find that Grimwood does not allow the second volume to be a place holder that moves the story on in minute fashion. In too many epic fantasies, the second book may move the story on but the reader is merely waiting for the final third-volume battle in which the world will be corrected again. In *The Outcast Blade*, the author challenges the notion of the second novel as a largely stationary one, apparently remodelling the world into something which can be easily put back together if a return to the original status quo is required.

After the clashing of the tectonic plates of Venice and the Byzantine Empire, in which Tycho earned his stripes, the two worlds have moved on and they have found new ideas.

There is no sense of a static world because of the ongoing threats of making Venice into a republic which will change the leading Million's relationship with the city. Grimwood takes on standard tropes of epic fantasy and, mixing them with

historical fact, challenges them.

Equally there is a certain indulgence of a mild fantasy of manners in the way that language is used as a weapon or for social position. Action is not merely present in combat but also in words and the way in which people use them for social manoeuvring.

Looked at as a dark fantasy novel, Grimwood seems to take his tone from Caminito's film *Vampire in Venice*, with the city teetering on decay and the memory of past vitality. Tycho's moment of revelation concerning his true nature, and his self-acceptance, begins forcing the other players to really look at themselves and their actions.

The supernatural darkness is kept as the mirror of the epic fantasy and places into a stark context the underlying stories. The idea of the epic hero as wholesome is visibly challenged with his monstrous side on full display even if his actions bring about the desired results. Even here Grimwood revels in the grim details of werewolves and vampires without being overly romantic about their natures. The reworking of the age-old war between the two supernatural tribes is folded into the dynastic tensions, allowing the horror to mesh with fantasy.

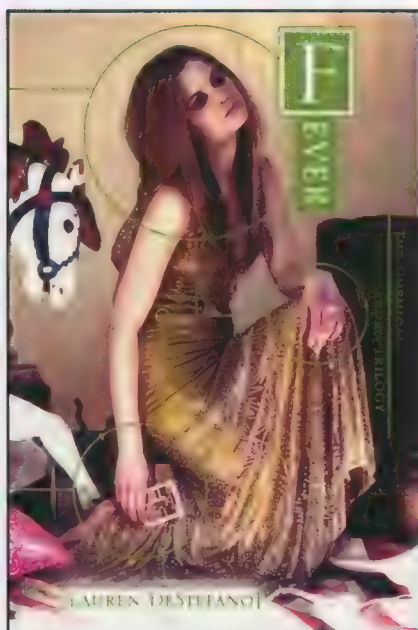
The author comments that "Venice was where worlds met to sell what others lacked" (p113), perhaps echoing the role of El Iskandariya (our Alexandria) in his *Arabesk* trilogy, and this seems highly appropriate in this series. It allows him to not only talk about the mixture of cultures from the eye of the storm, but to display them as well.

Everything happens around the city and requires that the characters cross into or escape from surrounding territories, as well as displaying the city as a microcosm of the greater battle. There is a wide range of supernatural elements which Grimwood marshals throughout but in such a way that one almost forgets that they are not human.

In the midst of the dynastic tensions, he focuses on the human aspects and the way that each person must interact with the others. There is a feeling of this turning into a revenge tragedy on various levels.

This book does, perhaps, suffer slightly from the wait for the third book but it seems to rush towards a real cataclysm which will change the world and those in it.

In the end, *Outcast Blade* is a well thought-out book that is a joy to read.

**FEVER****Lauren DeStefano**

Harper Voyager, 339pp, £9.99 pb

Reviewed by Jack Deighton

This is the second in DeStefano's Chemical Garden trilogy set in a world where all children are doomed to die of a virus by the age of 25. The only older inhabitants are the pre-virus First Generation. Accompanied by the young manservant Gabriel, Rhine Ellery has escaped from the mansion where she was brought after her kidnapping, leaving behind her forced marriage to the aristocratic son of the house, Linden, and the Housemaster, Vaughan, who performed sinister experiments in the basement. Her freedom does not last long, however, as she and Gabriel soon fall into the clutches of the deranged Madame Soleski, who runs a brothel in an old fairground complex. Rhine's characteristic non-matching eyes make her an asset to be prized. After a thwarted attempt to sell her on she and Gabriel are administered a drug known as Angel's Blood to keep them compliant, and to be the star act in a look, but don't touch, exhibit.

Despite her difficulties, Rhine finds an ally in Lilac, who helps the pair escape just as Vaughan turns up to try to persuade Rhine to return to her marriage. Rhine and Gabriel stow away on a truck, rely on the kindness of an old woman who tells Rhine's fortune ("things will get worse before they get better") and then of a pair of restaurant owners – the man tries to rape her before

Gabriel thumps him. Using money stolen from the restaurateur they finally take a bus to Rhine's former home, Manhattan.

Throughout the book, Rhine spends a lot of time ruminating on her twin brother, Rowan, who must think she's dead, and on her existence in the mansion. She also does not remove her wedding ring and in spite of her lack of years is showing increasing signs of the virus acting on her. And Vaughan's is a presence that she can't seem to shake.

DeStefano handles the story telling problems inherent in the second instalment of a trilogy mainly by making commendably little concession to them. However – without adding too much of a spoiler – you could skip this instalment before reading volume three.

There was, too, a whole series of wrong notes. Rhine displays knowledge of her new surroundings in the fairground and the activities of the "girls" in the compound before she could have acquired it. The behaviour of the older people she encounters does not seem much altered by the bizarre circumstances of the world. The only attempt to describe the conflict between those who seek a cure for the virus and others who have had enough of meddling with nature fails to convince. Rhine and Gabriel's refuge in Manhattan ties in too neatly with earlier events. Rhine's retention of her wedding ring is at odds with the attitudes and emotions she attributes to herself – and later displays. The rationale for, and logistics of, the "Gatherers" who steal girls only to shoot most of them remain unexplained. Despite all her experiences Rhine still goes out for an unaccompanied walk in the Manhattan she had been kidnapped from and then later sits on her doorstep in the middle of the night. This is a case of the exigencies of plot driving a character's behaviour which damages credibility. Vaughan is an even more pantomimic villain than he was in *Wither* and the narrative carries a strong undercurrent of anti-scientism.

The problems with the trilogy's background that were apparent in *Wither* are more evident two books in and the nature of the Chemical Garden is still mysterious. It would appear this world is effectively lawless but, beyond the virus, the mention of Gatherers and the dead bodies of kidnapped girls it is utterly familiar. There are still delivery trucks, restaurants, fortune tellers, brothels – even interstate buses, not to mention public meetings. It is as if DeStefano doesn't quite believe in it herself.

ROCKET SCIENCE**ROCKET SCIENCE****Ian Sales, ed**

Mutation Press, 320pp, £8.99 pb

Reviewed by Ian Hunter

Ah, *Rocket Science*. I intended writing a story for this anthology. Not that I'm particularly clued up in science fact, but I had gathered some medical snippets from *New Scientist* and other places to try to attempt a story called 'Doctor's Log' from the viewpoint of a doctor on a long journey through space.

Sadly it didn't happen, but perhaps in another reality it did, such as in one of the alternative realities suggested by Carmelo Rafala in his story 'Slipping Sideways' and has already won a Hugo, a Nebula, even the Priest Prize for Best Short Story not featuring a talking horse.

If you haven't guessed, *Rocket Science* is all about the science. The science in the fiction and in some cases the factual science within a few articles dotted throughout the anthology, and very different these articles are too, both in subject matter and tone.

Out of all of them, I preferred the breathlessly chatty, almost gossip-like delivery of Karen Burnham's piece on 'The Complexity of the Humble Spacesuit', a piece of kit we obviously take for granted given the delicate balance needed to get it just right and sustain the human life inside. Likewise, Bill Patterson's 'A Ray of Sunshine' is a joy. I can almost imagine sitting in Patterson's company as he says

"Well, you think ionising radiation is bad? What until you get a load of this another stuff!" There are clearly a lot of dangers out there, even if we don't make it that far from Earth. I should have written that space doctor story after all.

Setting aside the articles, with a short story collection it is horses for courses, and not everything can be the reader's cup of tea. In keeping with the two articles already mentioned, my favourite stories were those of a humorous or irreverent nature, coming at warp speed straight out of some left field dimension.

There are many good ones to choose from. Titles like 'Dancing on the Red Planet' by Berit Ellingsen and 'The Brave Little Cockroach Goes to Mars' by Simon McCaffery probably give the game away, though I would defy you to guess the fun in 'Why Barnaby Isn't Aboard the ISS Today' by Gary Cuba, and 'Going, Boldly' by Helen Jackson.

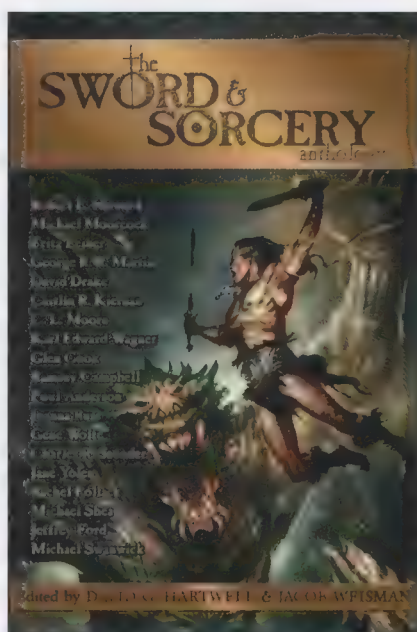
Not everything is a bundle of laughs. There is tragedy and even the mundane, the routine. Even if that routine involves a tense wait to make sure that a launch has been successful, such as David L. Clements' 'Launch Day' which is a pretty low key yet fascinating glimpse at what the reality of waiting for each stage to pass in a launch before everyone can sigh a great big collective sigh of relief, and the kiss of death it can also be for your career if it doesn't work out. Clements has lived this, and it shows.

Stephen Palmer's 'A Biosphere Ends' will tug at the heart strings, but I thought the saddest tale was probably Craig Pay's 'Incarnate', telling the story from one parent's perspective of what happens when the other parent won't let go and tries to put right the untimely death of their teenage daughter.

So, to borrow a phrase I heard recently from a pirate, "Scientists! Poindexters! Geeks! *Rocket Science* is a mighty fine collection and worth seeking out." Although I wonder if it is the kiss of death to say that 'Tell Me A Story', the opening take by Leigh Kimmel, is 'nice' and could induce a response of 'awww' from the reader? Maybe even bring a tear to a glass eye.

For me, it was the perfect way to open a collection like this, and I can appreciate why Sales put it there, but I also thought it would have been a perfect way to end it too – and perhaps in another reality it did.

www.mutationpress.com



THE SWORD & SORCERY ANTHOLOGY

David Hartwell & Jacob Weisman, eds

Tachyon Publications, 480pp, \$15.95 pb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

Sword and sorcery came into being as a term of reference in 1961, when Michael Moorcock demanded a term for the fantasy adventure stories written by people such as Robert E. Howard. Moorcock initially proposed 'epic fantasy' but it was Fritz Leiber, author of the Fafhrd and Grey Mouser stories, themselves quintessential examples, who suggested "sword-and-sorcery as a good popular catchphrase for the field".

As I read this anthology, one question kept resurfacing: why do we need a sword and sorcery anthology in 2012? Was it intended as an historical survey? The stories are not arranged in strictly chronological order and there is a mysterious thirty-year gap between Howard's 'Tower of the Elephant' (1933) and Moore's 'Black God's Kiss' (1934) representing the sub-genre's inception, and 1962, the year in which Moorcock's 'The Caravan of Forgotten Dreams' and Leiber's 'The Unholy Grail' were published. After that, there are examples from the 1970s and 1980s, one from 1998, and five from the twenty-first century, two of them original to the collection. Thematic, then, except that sword and sorcery is so distinctive a sub-genre it is difficult to ring much in the way of changes beyond male protagonist or

female (and there are a gratifying number, from Moore's Jirel of Joiry, via Joanna Russ's Alyx, to stories by Jane Yolen, Rachel Pollack, Charles R Saunders, George R.R. Martin and Caitlin R Kiernan).

To move too far from the central motif – the individual, almost always a loner, often driven by the memory of past inglorious deeds, handy with a sword as well as possessing a broad range of other skills, often cutting their moral cloth to suit the coat of circumstance – is to move into the broader arena of heroic fantasy or beyond. As a sub-genre sword and sorcery appears remarkably resistant to reinvention; even parody looks so much like the real thing it is impossible to tell the difference. Sword and sorcery does not easily lend itself to wit. Russ' feminist reworking 'The Adventuress' (1967) perhaps comes closest to refocusing the genre but that is so long ago; if a more recent feminist refashioning has taken place (and that requires more than a female protagonist) it is not included here.

In terms of the emotional development of the characters on the page, I was enjoying Glen Cook's 'Soldier of an Empire Unacquainted with Defeat' (1980), by far the longest story in the collection, not least for the novelty of a protagonist who, while he was inevitably exceptional and gifted, did not reach for the sword as his first response. It then occurred to me that the plot, of a stranger who stays to help a family threatened by the local lord, is almost identical to George Stevens' 1953 film *Shane*. Poul Anderson's 'The Tale of Hawk' (1977) is simply a reworking of an Icelandic saga, and even Caitlin R. Kiernan's 'The Sea Troll's Daughter', for all its amusing twists, leans heavily on *Beowulf* leavened by a dash of Russ. It's one of the best stories here but is it really sword and sorcery?

While the stories are not bad examples of the genre, so far as they go, this collection lacks any sense of context: the stories are not introduced properly and there are no author biographies. David Drake's 'Guided Ramble' is indeed that, mere anecdotal scraps concerning his own involvement in the field, mainly through Schiff's *Whispers* magazine. Not a word about that thirty-year gap. Drake's main observation, that stories about heroes and their deeds are "storytelling as the Cro-Magnons practiced it; and this is the essence of sword and sorcery fiction", only reinforces the feeling that sword and sorcery has made few significant advances. This collection certainly doesn't take the discussion any further.

MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

PROMETHEUS

MEN IN BLACK 3

IRON SKY

ABRAHAM LINCOLN:
VAMPIRE HUNTER

CHERNOBYL DIARIES

DARK SHADOWS

SNOW WHITE AND
THE HUNTSMAN

STORAGE 24



Prometheus

Once in a generation, a film comes along that grants permission to ask the really big questions. Are films the result of intelligent design, or do they just come randomly together through a series of Darwinian cockups over vastnesses of time? Is their meaning written in the heavens, or coded by infinite monkeys? Is Sir Ridley Scott a divine creator, or a sinister weaponer bent on trashing his own creation? If we follow the invitation encoded in the matrix of stars, will we find answers, or only shoggoth-haunted mountains of madness? Will we pursue the carefully laid trail of alien breadcrumbs thirty-five light years to source, only to find ourselves on the wrong planet entirely and our hosts long since destroyed by their own endeavour?

For those still questing for answers, it's worth dipping back into *Prometheus*' own genesis. Despite the thirty-year gap since *Blade Runner*, Scott has been hammering at the door to get back into sf for at least half that time. He spent a year and a half on *I Am Legend* in the nineties before Warners pulled the plug and he took his team off to make *Gladiator* instead; he was then involved, alongside James Cameron, on the followup to *Alien Resurrection* until Fox decided they'd rather monetise the *versus Predator* cross-brand; and at the time *Prometheus* came together he had been energetically developing an adaptation of *The Forever War*. *Prometheus*, on the other hand, seems not to have been a film he wanted to direct at all, and was originally announced to be made by 47 *Ronin*'s Carl Rinsch; it appears to have been Fox's insistence that Scott take the helm himself, at which point first-timer Jon Spaihts' original straight-up *Alien* prequel

was expensively unwoven in the Damon Lindelof rewrites to furcate off into a different prospective sequel, into which all answers to the questions actually driving this film have now been conveniently kicked. Who are the Engineers, why did they make us, why did they change their mind, and why did they summon us to their godforsaken bioweapons installation tens of thousands of years beforehand? If we're made from Engineer DNA, how did most of our genome get into chimps? If that's the first xenomorph being created on 1 January 2094, how did they manage to be on Earth centuries earlier in *AvP*?

Even if the projected sequel ever happens, we can be quietly confident that none of these questions will prove to have adequate answers. Scott and Lindelof have had a lot of explaining to do in the wake of the film's release, and the more they talk the less faith one feels in their sense of what they're doing. Surely the most ineptly written blockbuster of recent years, *Prometheus* marries stunning spectacle filmmaking to abjectly woeful science, plotting, and dialogue, reliant on liberally knocking back shots of magic black plot juice that will variously cause you to panspermatised planets, grow worms from your eyes, and inseminate human hosts with xenomorph precursors, depending presumably on dosage. There are laughable disconnects between simultaneous plotstrands, with a pervasive incuriosity on everyone's part about what's happened to the other characters. This is a film in which you can have a screaming self-administered caesarean and fight to the finish with a proto-xenomorph in one room, then stagger up (to incredulous guffaws from audience members who've

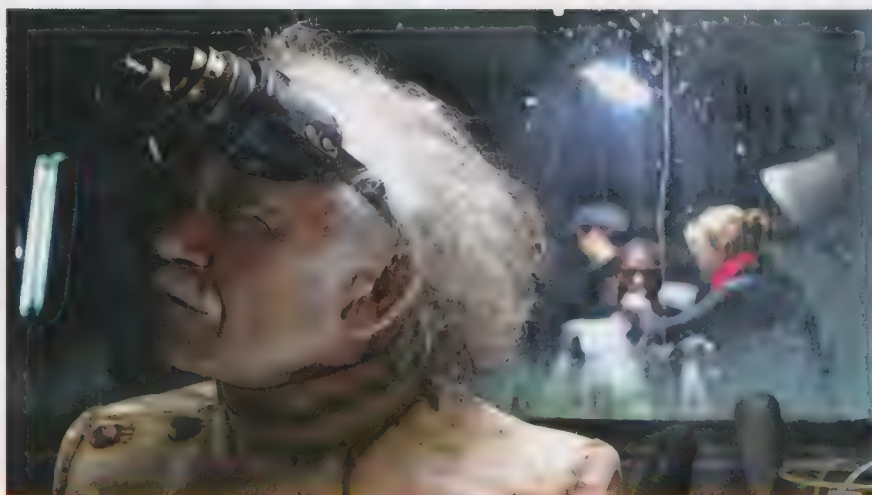


Men in Black 3

actually experienced a c-section) to find a roomful of characters next door who haven't noticed a thing.

Though the support cast are good, the three normally strong leads are at the absolute bottom of their game. Charlize Theron's underwritten bitch-queen rolls over to the pickup line "Are you a robot?"; while Michael Fassbender's prototype android would be a solid enough performance were it not that it's nothing like the androids in the earlier films, none of whom would ever do things like smiling to themselves when unobserved. As for Noomi Rapace's godbothered archaeologist, not only is she no Ellen Ripley, but she's not even *AvP*'s Alexa Woods. In a typical Hollywood attempt to appease all faiths and none, Elizabeth Shaw is a cross-wearing rationalist who believes in the reconcilability of science and creationism. Even her more sensible half finds words failing him: "If you're willing to discount three centuries of Darwinism, whoo," he apodosises with all the articulacy that the premise commands, "but how do you know?" – to which her best answer is "I don't, but it's what I choose to believe," as if favouring faith over evidence is merely an exercise of open hermeneutic choice. Nobody could dispute that, viewed simply as IMAX-scale Lovecraftiana, Sir Ridley's return to what he once did well is intermittently quite a thrilling experience; but as sf, as the man says, whoo.

Men in Black 3 is another decade-late sprequel that has voyaged back down its own franchise timeline to an origin story sited on a path of forks at the dawn of humanity's leap to the stars. In development so long that Arabic numerals have supplanted Roman in the title, and



Iron Sky

notoriously shot around a planned hiatus while its makers went away to figure out an ending, it's even more than *Prometheus* a strange glomeration of setups that go nowhere and payoffs that never come. The opening sequence establishes offworld supergaol Lunar-Max as the site of the Eagle's landing, yet the Apollo climax does nothing at all with the connection. K's latest origin story (making three in a row) sets up yet another romance from his past, which promisingly recruits both Emma Thompson and Alice Eve, only to run feebly into the sand at the close. Space supervillain Jemaine Clement's missing arm starts out as the focus of the entire time-travel plot, but is forgotten all about at the climax; while a strange restaurant scene in the first act seems to be cueing us to pay the special kind of attention to moment-by-moment detail that signals a bravura time-twisting return to this scene later on, only for nothing of the kind to happen. The film's most ambitious innovation is a character with the power to perceive all the alternate drafts of the plot at once; but as he tellingly says, "Oh dear, we're in this one."

None of this should surprise, since the whole film has been essentially built around wrangling its impossibly fussy stars back into uniform, in the face of visible unenthusiasm from Tommy Lee Jones, and a control-happy Will Smith commanding his every line to be buffed till he can see his perfect teeth in it. The solution addresses the brief neatly enough, if desperately, with a time-paradox plot that writes Jones out of the present-day action and recasts him as Josh Brolin for the rest of the film, allowing Smith to claim top billing at last and to return to the brand of comedy he used to

do better than all the things he's preferred to do since – though at the price of one of those maudlin father-son things that he seems to have written into his contract these days. But the character humour is strong, the 3D vertiginously well-used, and the usual stream of jokes about alien anatomy and integration confirm how comfortably the *MiB* films have settled into our cultural discourse as a space for frank discussion of immigration in the friendly, openly racist way we need. Perhaps we're simply not authorised to ask for more.

A darker lunatic parahistory unfurls its banners in **Iron Sky**, the mad Euro-Australian adventure in promiscuous international coproduction and crowdfunding that was released to cinemas more or less by accident, after a one-day promo for the DVD and digital release backfired when the screenings sold out and the resulting outcry bounced the distributors into a proper theatrical run. As you'd expect, this Finnish-originated satire about a lost Nazi base on the dark side of the moon is all over the place and its scattershot satire not to universal taste. But it has three or four genuinely inspired satirical ideas: the naive Erdologist heroine's discovery that "the Nazi message of peace and love" isn't seen in quite the same way back on Earth; the readiness with which National Socialism becomes the missing ingredient in President Palin's reelection campaign; and the deep genre conceit of playing Heinlein against Heinlein, by inverting *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* to make the utopian settlers the space Nazis from *Rocket Ship Galileo*. Some of the dialogue is Finnish humour at its most thigh-slapping ("You idiots! You morons! – That's an insult to morons!"),



Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

and the Eurocentric satire on American hegemony is pretty ham-fisted; but the production design and Laibach score are terrific, and amid the apocalypse slapstick there's a surprisingly evocative vision of an alternate present in which we really did colonise the moon when we were supposed to with bakelite-and-valve technology. Bear with the long, chaotic credits for the twist when the five-minute shot beneath them reaches its destination.

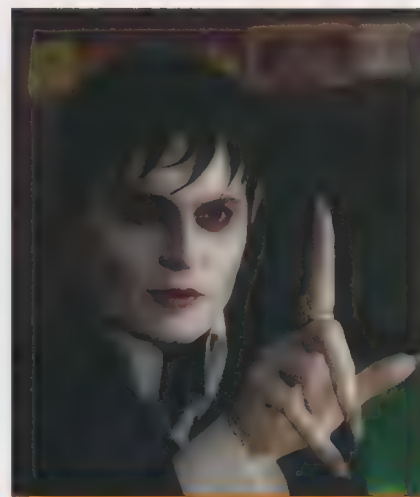
A more deadpan secret history of evil comes in **Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter**, Timur Bekmambetov's film of Seth Grahame-Smith's mashup novel, with screenplay by the author. Though Simon Kinberg did some uncredited polishing, the film is still essentially a from-scratch authorial rewrite of the rather lame novel, and reflects the book largely in the way that mirrors reflect the undead. The general premise stays, rewriting the tale of slavery and abolition as merely the visible symptoms of a covert war on the undead. But the film substantially revises the vampire mythology, adds a lead villain and promotes a couple of unused historical figures to sidekicks, and ditches the clumsily managed John Wilkes Booth storyline from the finale (after failed attempts to defibrillate it in early drafts). New action sequences are shoehorned in, including a showstopping digital stampede that's one of the few things this season you really haven't seen anything like before, and the Gettysburg finale is radically replotted to allow Mary Elizabeth Winstead's Mary Todd Lincoln actually to do something, if not nearly enough. Like the novel, it's played entirely straight, which makes for difficulties in all the ways you'd imagine. The central problem of novel and film,



Chernobyl Diaries

which neither knows how to deal with, is the thoroughly unamusing conceit that the Atlantic slave trade and the deaths of half a million Americans in the Civil War were not the result of paradigmatic human wickedness but merely a conspiracy by the undead, which in the film extends to writing off the Southern losses at Gettysburg as mostly vampire casualties. Grahame-Smith, to his credit, appreciates that all this is a problem, and works hard at keeping slavery a separate evil from vampirism – leading to a major structural problem when young Abe retires from axe-wielding action to campaign against what even he acknowledges is the greater horror, and the plot is put on hold for twenty years. But if the parahistorical gags fly mostly over the heads of global audiences, it's at least extremely well played and directed – even if that reluctance to allow Mrs Lincoln any but the most belated and tokenistic kicking of undead butt is an unconscionable failure of opportunity, given that the upcoming Spielberg version seems unlikely to address the lack.

Bekmambetov's cheeky Kazakh take on American history is answered by **Chernobyl Diaries**, which returns the dubious favour by dispatching six attractive western youngsters on an "extreme tourism" excursion to Pripyat that goes nastily awry as the ghost city turns out to be less deserted than a quarter-century of cleanup would like us to think – a suggestion that has played every bit as well as you'd imagine with the families and friends of the victims. Unlike January's Bekmambetov-produced *The Darkest Hour*, this low-budget version uses fake locations in Serbia and Hungary to stand in for its no-go setting, but still plays on



Dark Shadows

similar American fears of disconnection from the familiar and being stranded outside phone range with your tourguide's throat ripped out and nobody left who can negotiate with the local Morlocks. The title, some of the setups, and the script involvement of *Paranormal Activity's* Oren Peli suggest it was conceived as a found-footage exercise, but that in the end nobody could see the point. Though there are some efficiently delivered shocks and an atmospheric climax in the abandoned plant, the most evocative scenes for non-American viewers aren't the ones of being chased by mutant night-things, but being stranded in a van that won't start in the middle of somewhere you didn't want to be in the first place while everyone yells at everyone else for getting them into it. You don't need to go to Ukraine for a holiday like that.

Lincoln's producer Tim Burton was pleased enough with Grahame-Smith's work to recruit him for some of his own directorial projects, beginning with the rewrite of John August's **Dark Shadows** adaptation; and much of *Lincoln's* vampire mashup of American history carries over into this very weird endeavour, which seeks to distil the sprawling narrative matter of a thousand-episode gothic TV soap into a single more-or-less finite cinema story. In what may be the most completely postmodern blockbuster ever made, a cast of modern-day A-list stars play metathespian riffs on the strange performances of the original TV cast, with the series' wobbly production values lavishly recreated in top-of-the-range designs and digital effects, and the brooding Maine locations entirely impersonated by bits of Devon, in a



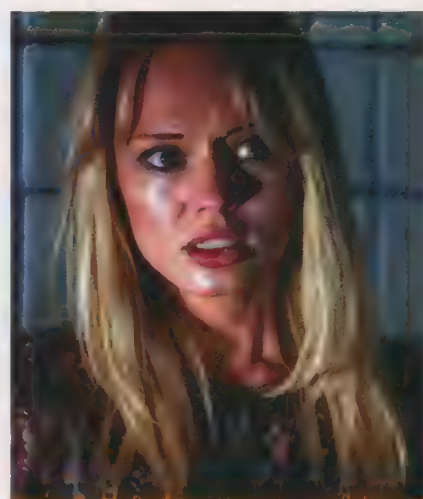
Snow White and the Huntsman

story set in what was then the immediate future (1972) but is now a time of pop nostalgia and Silvikrin dreams. If Warners thought that this was one of those *Alice in Wonderland* properties Burton would sprinkle his magic dust over and kiss into a debatrachised box-office prince, they badly judged their man. This is one of the films like *Ed Wood* and *Mars Attacks!* in which Burton and his extended family of longtime collaborators move into a tumbling period property and fix it up to their own peculiar taste, with refreshingly little concern for the conventional comforts of studio narrative.

There's rich enough film material in the Collins family's inapprehensibly vast web of bizarre plotlines and character secrets, from which the August/Grahame-Smith compositing of characters and storylines makes its own idiosyncratic selection. Unexpectedly, the film's weakness is its decision to centre its story around Johnny Depp's Barnabas Collins, the vampire ancestor awakened from two centuries in the grave to restore the family glory, who sucks the storylines out of the characters around him to the point where Michelle Pfeiffer's matriarch in particular is left with nothing to call her own. At the centre of the labyrinth is a rather interesting story about the export of the class system to the new world, where Barnabas damns his aristocratic progeny by fornicating with the help while wooing the aristocratic virgin, only for his discarded mistress to avenge herself on all his bloodline by nurturing regional industry away from his familial monopoly and establishing herself as the saviour of the local economy. But all this has to share screen space with a fish-out-of-water period comedy featuring the

occasional popup werewolf, and the overall effect is more strange than actually fun.

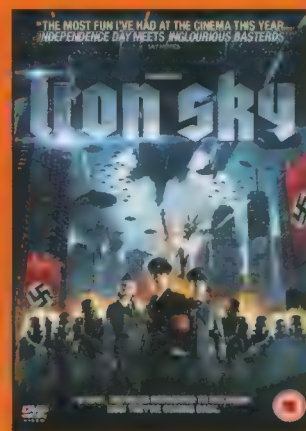
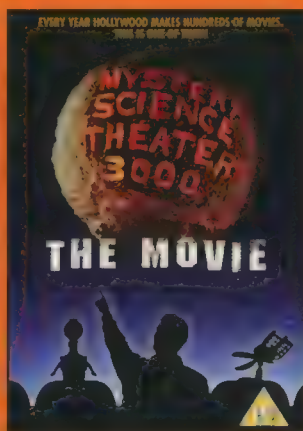
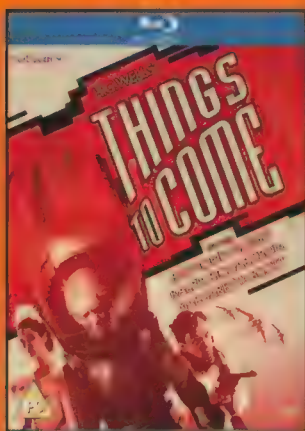
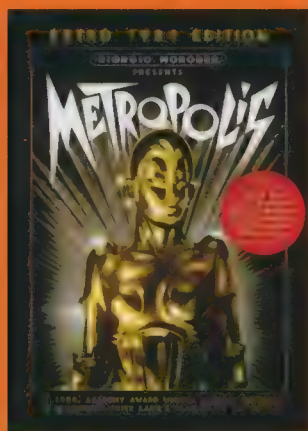
Depp was one of the long line of stars who politely declined the axeman gig in **Snow White and the Huntsman** which has ended up going to Chris Hemsworth, here cloaking his ovary-melting deep golden tones in a wholly inexplicable Shrek accent. Charlize Theron mugs her best, and much better than in *Prometheus*, in the now-familiar thankless role made peerless by Pfeiffer in *Stardust*, of the star on the turn whose advancing looks are subjected to merciless close-up scrutiny as she finds herself competing against a younger model. "Men use women," she laments. "They ruin us and when they are finished with us they toss us to their dogs like scraps ... When a woman is young and beautiful the world is hers." And it has to be admitted she has a point: unlike in the generally superior *Mirror Mirror*, the Snow White she's pitted against is indeed the top-earning actress of 2012, for all that Kristen Stewart in a suit off armour is a curious idea of anyone's fairest of anything. A grimly misconceived film by every applicable standard, with sluglike pacing, a that-was-it? ending, and thumpingly on-the-nose dialogue throughout ("My brother tells me you are a widower, a drunkard, and one of the few who has been into the dark forest"), it does at least make an effort to think about Grimm; there's a "Mythic and Folklore Advisor" credit to fantasy scholar Bill Gray, who may be behind the bolder touches of imagery like the digital fairies climbing out of magpies. But the Dark Forest itself is an unfortunately panGilliamesque mashup of *Holy Grail*, *Brothers Grimm*, and *Time Bandits* where the shadows threaten to go "Ni!" at every start, and the



Storage 24

dwarfs terrorise the countryside with their dreadful dwarfish songs: "Dark the waves and dark the sky/Hush the whales and the ocean's tide." (We hear quite a lot of this one; I expect those whales need a fair bit of hushing.) "We're promised gold," they complain, "and what do we get? Poo." Next time they'll read the fine print about back-end payments.

A somewhat more contemporary take on English folk culture comes in **Storage 24**, a resolutely no-frills frolic about a group of late-night customers trapped by a spacewrecked predator in a Battersea lockup. A cheery riff on *Attack the Block* without the aspirations to social conscience, it deploys Noel Clarke and a brace of blondes on a tentacle-dodging all-night chase through what must be London's most duct-riddled self-storage, where the lights invariably go out and on with a booming metallic thump, and low-level dissident acts like smoking in shared vehicles turn out to be whomping great plot setups. ("You must be the only person in the world who still uses matches.") Clarke, who came up with the story, travels a pleasing arc from breakup-obsessed comedic tool to reluctant action hero, and the whole thing makes refreshingly little secret of its ultimate creative origins: "No aliens were harmed in the making of this picture," joshes the disclaimer, "except one that was horrible and was killed by the hero." As Sir Ridley likes to say of his latest, it shares *Alien* DNA; but the kind that doesn't so much lure you on a boobytrapped quest for God as burst out of a chest to dangle tentacles down and haul you up into the ceiling to eat your brain. The Engineers know, we've come a long way to get here. ♦



LASER FODDER TONY LEE

METROPOLIS

• THINGS TO COME

• MYSTERY SCIENCE
THEATER 3000: THE MOVIE

• IRON SKY

• HUMANITY'S END

• EARTH 2

• LESBIAN VAMPIRE WARRIORS

• GHOST RIDER: SPIRIT OF
VENGEANCE

• PAINTED SKIN

• FALLING SKIES

• HELL

• JOHN CARTER

• TOTAL RECALL

• ANIME ROUND UP

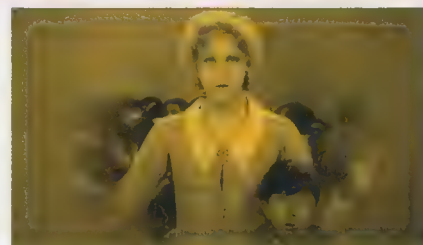
• AMICUS STUDIO ROUND UP

• THE ASTRONAUT FARMER

WHEELSPIN REINVENTED

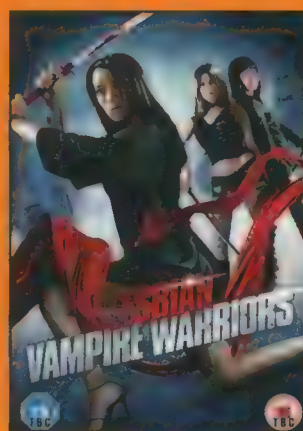
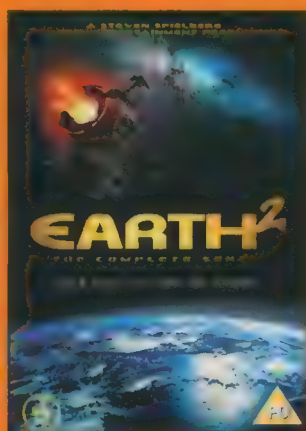
Criticism of, or praise for, remakes usually hinges upon: the original's great as it is, or there was plenty of room for improvement anyway. Since the 1980s was an especially productive decade for genre movies, it's no surprise that John Carpenter's *The Thing*, Cronenberg's *The Fly*, and Chuck Russell's *The Blob* proved that revisionism of 1950s B-movies could mean better versions of old b&w sci-fi (technically, aesthetically, and even dramatically). But in the multiverse of adaptation, is there, or can there ever be, a definitive version of any work? If novels such as *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, 'Jekyll and Hyde' etc are repeatedly being re-interpreted and/or redefined (just as Shakespeare is on both stage and screen) for every new generation of movie fans, what is the point in complaining about remakes of very old, or even quite recent, movies? Despite a few contrary indications, most viewers are, broadly speaking, not particularly eager to see anything radically different. Usually, they choose to wallow in familiar comfort zones of repetition, or at least some degree of thematic/narrative continuity, as explored in today's abundance of sequels (or in formulaic TV), and industrious Hollywood is only too happy to cater to such preferences.

Curiously, the urge to restyle cult flicks or cinematic favourites also extends to obvious tinkering. Spielberg's 1980 'special edition' of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) sounded a death knell for the completion of any specific movie. Since the video boom era, Hollywood profiteers jumped on this whole new type of bandwagon, so that the 30th anniversary Blu-ray set of *CE3K* contained three versions of the film, with the 1998 edition championed by its director as ultimate.



Spielberg later revamped *E.T.* (1982) via CGI into an extended but also friendly version (of politically correct images) for its 20th anniversary. Now Spielberg's *Jaws 3D* threatens to trump Cameron's 3D *Titanic*, following a spate of 3D versions of existing movies in the latest cyclic trends. George Lucas' first *Star Wars* trilogy had allegedly progressive changes akin to retcon activity of superhero comics. After outcries from genre fandom against such laundromatic 'enhancement' of classics, perhaps only 'official' restoration work, and/or digital remastering for HD releases, is tolerable as customisation of existing movies. And yet, if every 'finished' artistic creation, old or new, is just as flawed as the artist(s) that created it, why should new opportunities – often provided and suggested by progressive technologies, to fix any long niggling faults in a movie – be ignored, simply because there is an obvious exploitative, commercial angle to the recycling process of complexification or purification?

The advent of Ridley Scott's masterly *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (Interzone #214), as part of a five-disc boxset, gave cult sci-fi fandom, movie collectors, and film students alike a rare chance to see how the alterations (like workings-out-in-margins) of redevelopment hell in a 25-year creative process might result in legitimate artistic achievement. However, despite the notion that Art is never finished, only abandoned,



some purists may scoff at blatant meddling with long familiar 'originals'. Never mind Moroder's tinted, subtitled edit of **Metropolis** (DVD, 23 July) – with its often kitsch 1980s' pop soundtrack by Freddie Mercury, Pat Benatar, Jon Anderson, Bonnie Tyler, Adam Ant, et al – should Fritz Lang's silent genre landmark (*Interzone* #232) have been archived in its vintage state, or is all the more recent doctoring of rediscovered/aged materials a genuinely worthwhile project (21st century copyright reinstatement aside)? Predictably, a few songs make assorted symbolic/gothic/romantic scenes in the film effective like found footage sampling clips from promo videos (the 'house of sin' chapters in particular), as a kind of visual remix job that's not without merit as a surrealist salvage project.

There are other cases deserving of consideration, too. H.G. Wells' **Things to Come** (Blu-ray, 18 June), includes the 2007 restoration job "virtual extended edition", using texts and images in place of the lost footage and unfilmed scenes, but what about the often maligned practice of colourisation? Does the colour version of *Things to Come* (reportedly supervised by highly respected animator Ray Harryhausen) honestly and patently benefit from such a technological reprocessing? Personally, I think that it does, which makes it rather mystifying why Harryhausen's artistically valid edition has



been omitted from the new HD release.

Of course, if you simply cannot afford to remake and practically improve or change anything, just add your own footnoted annotations or laugh track.

Mystery Science Theater 3000:

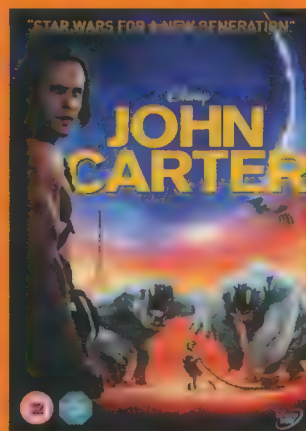
The Movie (DVD/Blu-ray, 11 June) is an awfully misguided heckle-fest. Its snarky commentary is of an immature variety, all the more disrespectful, and unfathomably so, because the target for ridicule here is Technicolour space opera *This Island Earth* (1955), undoubtedly one of the very best and most beloved of pulp sci-fi adventures. Rambling sarcasm, childish quips, and intrusive observations – not incisive criticism – is the blunt tool of MST3K humour. There's no genuine wit. It's all just fanboy noise from a peanut gallery of trolls.

Iron Sky (DVD/Blu-ray, 28 May) is a knockabout, positively ramshackle pulp satire that feels like a remake but isn't. Showcasing survivalism of the mightiest WW2 fanaticism as a lingering threat (as in *They Saved Hitler's Brain*, 1963), it is a flipside to politically conscious sci-fi like Harry Horner's *Red Planet Mars* (1952), and a geek gala from Timo Vuorensola, the Finnish director of cult *Star Wreck* (*Interzone* #222).

Naziplotation set in 2018, *Iron Sky* begins with a black American astronaut as POW in a German secret base on the dark side of the Moon. Achtung! From 'swastika city', der Götterdämmerung



will fly as 21st century WMD, ordered by Udo Keir as the new loony Führer. Brave soldier Adler (Götz Otto, 'Stamper' from Bond movie *Tomorrow Never Dies*) pilots the Luna UFO to NYC, with bride-to-be/sidekick scientist Renate as stowaway. They face-off against a Sarah Palinesque teabag US president, and the femme fatale PR manager who mimics the existing spoofs of those 'Hitler reacts to...' clips infamously re-subtitled from Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Downfall* (2004), favoured – ad nauseum – by YouTube satirists. It's a moment of recycled japey that is dizzying as twisty pop-art meme. Even with formalities of prep for this absurd Fourth Reich's long delayed invasion fleet led by flagship Siegfried, launching a meteor blitzkrieg of Earth set to Wagner's anthemic 'Ride of the Valkyries', this is not seriously pro-Nazi, of course – as it gamely spoofs *Independence Day*, and pokes fun at all warmongers. Its feverishly comical delirium gets crazy as a *Dr Strangelove* + *Mars Attacks* combo. Sharper and wittier than CGI-fest *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, much better fun (as the proverbial moon menace movie) than the crappy pseudocumentary *Apollo 18*, it's a delightfully farcical twilight of the gods' last gleaming and tells us this is the way the world ends, not with a whimper but a twinkling wink, and a space war spectacle of hysterical alt. future history that could make Roger Corman turn a shade of Hulk green with envy.



Made in 2009, **Humanity's End** (DVD, 21 May) is from British-born Neil Johnson, director of *Battlespace* (2006) and *Alien Armageddon* (2011), and like those pictures this is a low-budget sci-fi actioner. A cheap and cheesy B-movie, it has no big star names, even in cameo roles, yet benefits from such casting decisions as there is nothing here to distract viewers from the hokey but fun plot ('nephilim' aliens chase the last man), focusing attention on the overcooked visual effects and its clutch of generic/stylistic references: *Spacehunter* comedy, *Mad Max* freakiness, Roger Corman-esque schlock budget-priced space opera that imitates *Star Wars* battles. A hackneyed storyline of in-joke sketches zips along from planetary conquest to stargate escapade. Overall, it's more like Stuart Gordon's witty *Space Truckers* than the OTT farce of Mel Brooks' *Spaceballs*, with a preference for the nonsense of *Ice Pirates* twists – venting plasma from both ends. It's a threadbare but nonetheless colourful pulpy adventure, and the ultimate doom awaiting our blokey hero – whose mission profile has the exit strategy of a suicide bomber – is clearly predicated on his smarmy playboy failures. He cannot even make his female android (who is unaware she's a robot of course) happy. There may not be much fresh blood to be found in cold stones of horror, but Johnson works hard to get a refuelling out of some wandering asteroids, granting the final trek of this used module significant extra mileage from its genre tropes of apocalypse.

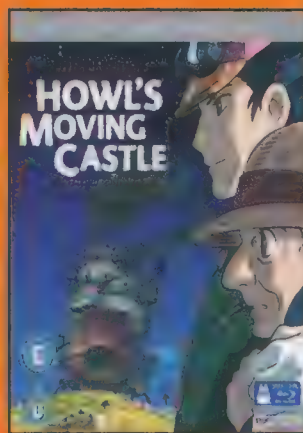
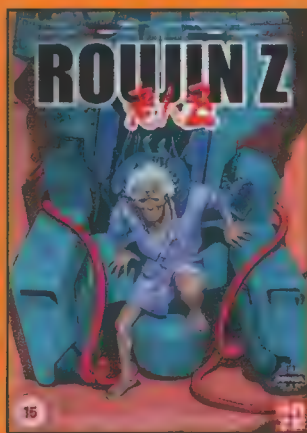
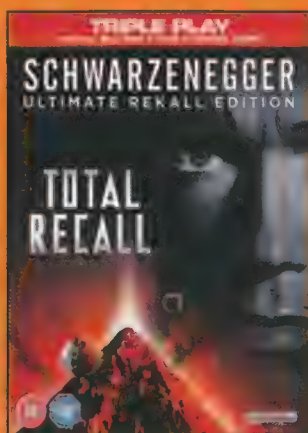


Made in 1994–5, TV series **Earth 2** (DVD, 28 May) is 21 episodes of 23rd century sci-fi about an exodus from the orbital habitat of a ruined world. After a generation of hypersleep, the space-ark crash-lands on an alien planet light years distant, where survivors struggle to make a new home on an Earth-like world (the US show was filmed on New Mexico locations) which has two moons in its sky. The first episode has some hard-SF (or at least non-*Star Trekian*) space travel scenes but, following that, the main series presents a starter pack title sequence that's a bit misleading as there is nothing much in the show to please or interest fans of space opera. It's a planet-bound saga of alien discoveries and human quest adventures. Survivors include a lady doctor, a corporate johnny, a cyborg teacher, and background characters in an assortment of spacers and pioneer stereotypes. Their nomadic existence is led by the intelligent and resourceful Devon Adair (Debrah Farentino, of TV series *Eureka*), and she's usually supported by mechanic Danziger (Clancy Brown, *Highlander*, *Burrowers*), partly because they are both single parents with similar concerns for safety and caution, yet without any loss of courage. She often plays

the voice of reason. He is often too like a no-nonsense Mr Practicality to succumb to irrational fears about any kind of ET weirdness.

Two meddling little kids complicate security problems of their caravan trek en route to Eden project's 'promised land' of New Pacifica. In addition to the families, there's a robot named Zero, but its workhorse usage and limited presence staves off a comparison to *Lost in Space*. Telepathic/spiritual communication (within a kind of aboriginal dreamtime) affects the primary contactee, crippled pilot Alonzo (Antonio Sabato Jr), with hive-mind links of indigenous races, which informs motley colonists' meetings with grotesque grey mole people – who are enslaved by Tim Curry playing a hippie serial killer whose only 'friends'/followers are trolls and gremlins (animals or beings?). The group dynamic and personal interactions depend heavily on backstory revelations and character development in mainstream TV fashion. The environment itself exhibits healing powers, as the disabled boy is made healthy (via mutation) and poison victims return from death. A disruptive influence, Terry O'Quinn appears on the far end of a VR comm-link directing a conspiracy with his troublesome spy in the survivors' camp, so it's as if working towards co-operation/compromise to overcome frictions within the group would not be dramatic enough for the programme makers, who hamper storyline progress by injecting several antisocial/political conflicts into this already volatile scenario, with its hazardous journeying into unknown territories as Devon leads the search for cargo pods dropped from orbit.

The symbiotic relationship between life and the planet itself, which is a



kind of Gaian ecosphere produced by highly advanced evolution, shows nature apparently in perfect balance with its metaphysical plane. Episode *Moon Cross* involves an esoteric ritual by the alien molen men, and introduces psychically attuned orphan-gone-native Mary (Kelli Williams, lately of TV series *Lie to Me*). During a wintry season, a frozen creature (pace *The Thing*) is discovered, with easily predictable consequences. "We find it impossible to learn about this world without learning about ourselves" sadly epitomises the woolly new age mumbo-dumbo informing many standalone episodic plot devices: like a haphazard teleportation system, a message from the future, or the pollen fever that hastens springtime.

Axed before its completion, the story arc is left dangling with colonial politics in conflict with 'foreign' cultures. Meanwhile, the cloned horse, campfire scenes, and rugged desert landscapes, makes *Earth 2* an obvious space western (especially a sci-fi version of wagon-train pioneers), but it's a superior cross-genre effort to the later *Firefly*, although it does tend to wallow in the soapy lives of hackneyed secondary characters with lots of opportunities for acting and emoting but few explorations of well conceived SF notions, so there's rarely enough weight to its wonders. Not having seen this before, I had hoped for the best, but the show is slightly disappointing overall even as TV sci-fi. That said, it's still not stupidly contrived, like lame BBC series *Outcasts* (2010), which also has beleaguered colonists – in a fortress township – struggling to survive against planetary weirdness beneath a desert sky with two moons, while shamelessly borrowing its doppelganger aliens and ghosts of loved ones from *Solaris* and the late Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*.

Dennis Law's genre actioner *Vampire Warriors* (2010) is released in UK as **Lesbian Vampire Warriors** (DVD, 23 June), a grungy Hong Kong squatters' variation of TV *Buff*, for which illiterate heroine Ar is the vampire slayer. She has made friends with an extended family of 'vegetarians' who have fangs and flying powers. They are bored with immortality, depressed about being undead and loitering without intent, so they amuse themselves by betting on how long a dying old woman has left to live. Drinking water knocks them out and their passivity makes them easy prey for urban predators. Yes, the ancient vampire is far nastier than 'younger' sympathetic types, and he lures victims to feed on them until only dust or smoke remains. A mostly nocturnal action comedy (although vampires cannot smile), this has lots of wire fu, granting its martial arts sequences a suitably fantastical edge, but has precious little of the kitschy fun that *Twins Effect* (2003) delivered, and as poet A.C. Evans has noted "Yesterday's kitsch is tomorrow's culture". In the end, Ar learns that, when 'good' needs to destroy 'evil' in the form of the most powerful vampire, a straightforward defeat isn't enough. The path to victory if not glory, as observed by Colonel Smith in *The A-Team* remake, suggests that "overkill is underrated".

Co-directed by Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, the makers of *Crank* and *Gamer*, comic book sequel **Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance** (Blu-ray/DVD, 25 June) is another worthwhile genre cinema adventure for Nicolas Cage, who hasn't been quite this edgy and off the leash for years ("Hell, yes!"). He goes barking mad, "scraping at the door" of knife-sharp insanity while transforming into a flaming-skull demon like a hulk-out nightmare of a screeching vampire biker.

Ghost Rider eats souls with his penance stare and smites the wicked to dust as he roars maniacally across eastern Europe leaving disaster areas in his wake, while pitched against Russian mafia types in pursuit of the devil's child Danny (Fergus Riordan), primed for an antichrist role. The boy's mother, Nadya (Violante Placido, *The American*), is more hanger-on than the antihero's sidekick, but devout boozier Moreau (Idris Elba, *Prometheus*) suggests the purposeful mission and lends appropriate support for Johnny Blaze's redemptive cause.

Bullets and grenades cannot stop Ghost

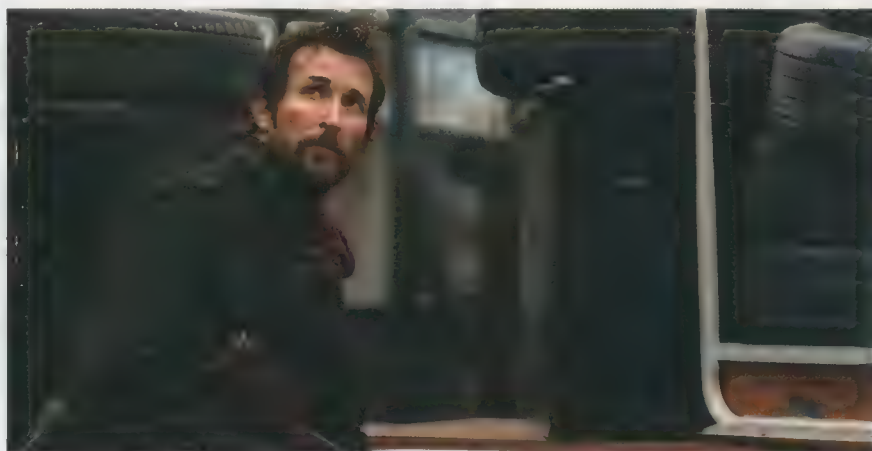
Rider and missiles only annoy him. He is a fire-spewing cartoon grotesque that wields red-hot chain-whips to subdue foes, and can 'ride' anything, including a giant digging machine with rotating shovels. Pure comic book animated sequences help to deliver us from the necessary evils of solemn info-dumps and explanatory flashbacks. Satan incarnate Roarke (Ciarán Hinds on good form) makes deals without the possibility of salvation. Christopher Lambert plays a bald, tattooed priest offering sanctuary, and there's a cameo for Anthony Head. Mercenary kidnapper Carrigan (Johnny Whitworth, *Limitless*) is killed yet returns with the power of decay. Crazy humour and loony imagination provide great fun while the freewheeling plot surges towards a rite of transmigration at winter solstice. Filming on locations in Romania and Turkey furnishes more than a few stunning exotic backdrops. There is a road chase finale paying tribute to *Mad Max 2*, but it is a great shame the filmmakers neglected to use 'Ghost Rider' by Rush on the rock soundtrack. Never mind. The HD transfer looks fine.



"You're the demon. Don't deny it," Gordon Chan (maker of *2000 AD*, *The Medallion*, *King of Fighters*) directed **Painted Skin** (DVD, 25 June) in 2008. It is a costumed fantasy romance, an adaptation of a short story – reportedly filmed twice before, and remade for TV – from classic Chinese literature. Army deserter Yong (Donnie Yen) returns home, and finds that his brother Commander Wang (Kun Cheng, *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate*) is mentoring beautiful orphan Xiaowei (Xun Zhou, *True Legend*, *Confucius*). Xiaowei wants to marry the kindly Wang but the soldier's wife Peirong (Wei 'Vicky' Zhao, *Red Cliff*, *Mulan*, *14 Blades*) is in the way. Yong is the first to suspect that a supernatural threat lurks in his brother's house. Xiaowei acts innocent and vulnerable but she's a fox spirit that eats human hearts to maintain her youthful appearance, and manages to haunt unsuspecting Wang's dreams, prompting him to stray. Yong gets help and some unreliable advice from a self-professed demon hunter, vengeful Xia (Betty Sun, *Lost Bladesman*), in the town stalked by a poisonous serial killer.

Spooky comedy tangles up with action in this appealingly ironic love triangle plotline. Xiaowei has a sometimes ghostly servant who frames Yong for murder, and it seems this can only end in tragedy – a tragedy of the doomed and the damned – but the moral of this fable is that hatred prevents justice, so a happy ending of sorts is a most fitting closure to suspense and courtly intrigues. Good performances, plenty of atmosphere, nocturnal rooftop chases and stylish battle fu (ably supported by a lively score) add content to some passable but unexceptional visual effects – although the vivid skinless scene of evil Xiaowei's willing exposure to Peirong is unnerving enough to deliver a disturbing frisson. This is not a truly great cross-genre Asian movie like Ronny Yu's *Bride with White Hair*, but *Painted Skin* is quite enjoyable nonetheless.

A sequel, *Painted Skin: The Resurrection*, is released this summer.



Chicken Little was right! Robert Rodat's **Falling Skies: Season One** (DVD/Blu-ray, 2 July) is yet another post-holocaust/alien invasion drama. This tale is set in Boston, Massachusetts but shot in Canada. Unlike those disguised reptiles in the remake of *V* (*Interzone* #231), these hideous ETs are not "of peace"...ever. Or, so it seems, at first. When resistance fails, the survivors begin their long march out of the city, split into a ragtag army against spidery 'skitters' and stomping 'mechs'. Now everyone's a soldier in the urban war zone, even if they are not a trained fighter. Parasites, like those slugs from *The Puppet Masters* (1994), are used by the aliens to 'harness' human prisoners into slave labour. Robot drones, like super-sized Cylon toasters, play Terminator and Dalek roles. Bravery or tactics might win battles but only strategy and know-how can win a war. Predictably, there's the usual mixed bunch of cynics and believers, cowards and maniacs, realists and dreamers, and numerous mindsets in between those poles.

Military history professor Tom (Noah Wyle, *Librarian* TV movies) is searching for one of his missing sons, Ben, captured by the enemy. Spielbergian sentimentality intrudes on tensions of a promising action premise, right from the off (a piano player is kept busy on the bland score), while the slow plot circles around Tom's relationship with 12-year-old son Matt (Maxim Knight). Moon Bloodgood (*Terminator Salvation*) plays fiercely compassionate doctor Annie. Will Patton (*Armageddon*, *The Postman*, *Fourth Kind*) is good value as nominal leader Captain Weaver, who assists in a breech birth during a siege, and struggles with drug addiction to maintain his command. The heroes have kidnap troubles with an outlaw gang, but also pick up support personnel along their

scavenging route, like obsessive surgeon Harris (Steven Weber) and untrustworthy but very useful ex-convict Pope (Colin Cunningham). A recruited gun-girl, Maggie (Sarah Carter), proves to be the only reliable addition to the refugees' huddle.

Barricaded in JFK high school for heavy-handed symbolism of last stand crisis, Tom & Co capture one skitter for caged study (with apparent interspecies telepathy), and a post-mortem discovery that redraws battle plans. A rescue mission saves POW Ben and some other enslaved kids, but freed youngsters with spinal scars are dubbed 'razorbacks' by some paranoid adults. Complications arise when a military newcomer is revealed as a traitor who sacrifices kids to lizards, and the whole scenario is further heightened by sighting of bipedal overlords under the sky-tower hub. Amusingly, the aliens recycle human ammo dumps for weapons instead of bringing their own hi-tech gear, saving transport costs for their conquest of Earth, and this TV production quite a bundle on designs for otherworldly hardware. However, during our heroes' planned first strike – against the 'mothership' base – that Tom and Weaver hope will fend off an expected attack from the walking mecha, this proves to be the invaders' weakness, leaving the enemy vulnerable to simple EM countermeasures and copycat weaponry.

Overall, *Falling Skies* has better characters, acting, and story developments, than *The Walking Dead* (*Interzone* #234), but its keening/soporific/trite family dramas present us with no bright ideas, so there's nothing really fresh here and not much else of interest to sci-fi fans that was overlooked by Spielberg's archly Disneyfied *War of the Worlds* remake. Accordingly, the sense of watching recycled material is palpable throughout.



European SF-horror **Hell** (Blu-ray/DVD, 2 July) is the first movie by Tim Fehlbaum. Set in 2016, it's the year of a dangerously super bright Sun, when solar flares have all but scorched the Earth, leaving a particularly grubby apocalyptic planet that is overly dour and somewhat depressing. Made fifty years after *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, this suggests what might have

happened if the ambiguous dénouement of that classic British disaster movie followed the 'world doomed' and not 'world saved' option.

Phillip is surviving on the road with Marie and her younger sister Leonie. They are peaceful scavengers attacked by violent raiders from a rundown farm. The captors are delusional in their attempts to maintain

familial piety by any means necessary. It includes the prospects of cannibalism and kidnap-for-breeding of young women. *Hell* is well made, but its low budget limits any effective scenario beyond that of just a few unlucky survivors wandering the rural wastelands. Pointlessly fussy camera work and twitchy editing combine with palettes faded to whiteout exteriors and dusty interiors, so that grim appearances contribute to an already downbeat atmosphere. It is of marginal interest as subgenre drama for brutal depictions of the loss of humanity. As a German production, it is difficult to avoid interpreting this as yet another bleak allegory of Nazism – a cracked form of *Lebensraum* – but one that is undistinguished and mediocre if compared to the likes of B-movie favourite *World Gone Wild* (1989), and Xavier Gens' *Frontier(s)* in particular. Luc Besson accomplished far more without dialogue, but with pitiless sense of humour intact, almost thirty years ago in *The Last Battle*.



Nowadays, movie trailers come packaged with full plot spoilers, and so they usually seem about weakening any element of surprise (as if to circumvent disappointment), instead of building up anticipation, expectations, and hopes for entertainment value. The three-minute trailer for Ridley Scott's mighty *Prometheus* gives the whole game away. Similarly, Disney's planetary romance **John Carter** (Blu-ray/DVD, 2 July) is an epic adventure, but its spectacular trailer reveals practically everything important about the movie. Despite such criticism, *John Carter* is as entertaining as it possibly could be for a blockbuster based upon a century-old pulp finally adapted for cinema decades after *Star Wars* looted its panoramic visions. From its wild west parallels to steampunk *Flash Gordon* and interspecies gladiatoria, that's more a designer fantasy than science fiction, Pixar graduate director Andrew

Stanton fashions his medley of familiarity into something that is fairly pleasant and fun viewing, but still manifestly unexceptional.

We see prospector hero John Carter (Taylor Kitsch, *Battleship*) find a mythic cave of gold, before he's telegraphed from Earth to become the saviour of Barsoom. A *Hulk* parody shows Carter learning to walk again in the lower gravity. He soon meets rebellious princess Dejah (Lynn Collins, *Uncertainty*, TV series *Haunted*): "From the moment you caught me in the sky, I knew". He challenges the giant barbarian Tharks into civil unrest. He puts up with the monster dogs of dry slobber. Eventually, Carter learns that what happens on Mars stays on Mars. It's rather more likeable than good. Even considering its postmodern meta-fictional element featuring young heir Edgar Rice Burroughs (Daryl Sabara, *Spy Kids*), I cannot help but think of *John*

Carter as a backward step for inspirational genre cinema, and the vast fortune sunk into CGI for its manufacturing process would very probably have been better spent on filming the imaginative story of colonisation and terraforming from Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy of *Mars* novels.

John Carter does succeed in exploring the dramatic impetus of science versus religion ("The heart is luxury") alongside its racial commentary, where contrasting philosophies between green/red skinned inhabitants suggest ecological themes so painfully relevant for such a dying world. Also poignantly, *John Carter* is better than the sadly overblown *Avatar*, but quite inferior to *Dune*. Whereas David Lynch's opus built solidly and magnificently upon its grand space opera foundations, just as Frank Herbert's creation layered big thematic complexity over Burroughs' original fairy tale simplicity, Disney's *John Carter* presents too little far too late in the game. Narrative sci-fi must always take note of what has gone before. Unfortunately, Stanton borrows from the safe bet of *Star Wars* imagery instead of attempting to re-imagine Barsoom as something truly alien. Of course, Disney corporate thinking rejects blatant risk but, in the end, that is the only way forward if genre cinema intends to make any progress beyond the cool yet timid quality of reiteration. *John Carter* will do for now, but John Boone would certainly be more welcome!



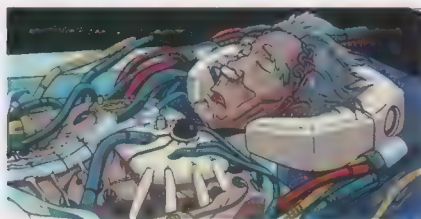
There are several varieties of triple-movie models, as clarified by chaptered articles in *Film Trilogies: New Critical Approaches* edited by Claire Perkins and Constantine Verevis (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). This is a typically dry and humourless academic text, examining the 'plasticity' of differences between organic/thematic film series, auteurist cycles/motifs, and franchising via 'threequels', in 'multiplying' or 'limited' formats. The book contains essays about the *Creature (of the Black Lagoon)* trilogy, the *Scream* quartet, plus critiques of Abel Ferrara, Michael Haneke, and Park Chan-wook, and it highlights the notion of 'broken' trilogies (think of those

belated *Psycho* sequels, or Argento's 'Three Mothers'). However, it is focused mainly upon art house productions, although even a cursory study of trilogies reveals that genre movies are a major part of the whole 'triadic logic' industry (surprisingly, the *Manhunter* – *Silence of the Lambs* – *Hannibal* set is not mentioned in the book; nor is John Carpenter's peculiarly Lovecraftian trilogy *The Thing* – *Prince of Darkness* – *In the Mouth of Madness*), and some genre trilogies extend to a belated 'reprise' in fourth outings for favourite characters, as ageing stars revisit their most iconic roles (notable examples include *Die Hard* and the Indiana Jones movies).

As literary/comics adaptations, epic trilogies (*Lord of the Rings*, *Chronicles of Narnia*, *20th Century Boys*) are intentional or planned from the start, but many others are clearly money-spinning follow-ups to successful/influential cult or highly commercial originals (see *Addams Family*, *Basket Case*, *Blade*, *Chinese Ghost Story*, *Creepshow*, *Darkman*, *Death Note*, *Evil*

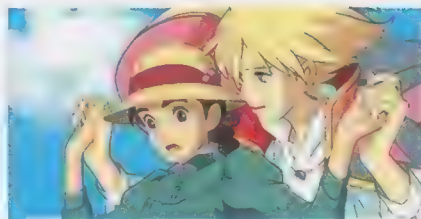
Dead, *The Exorcist*, *The Eye*, *Ginger Snaps*, *The Grudge*, *Hostel*, *Jaws*, *Maniac Cop*, *The Mummy*, *Poltergeist*, *The Prophecy*, *Re-Animator*, *The Stepfather*, *Warlock*, *Xtro*, and George Romero's fine double-trilogy of zombie classics). Fantasy/supernatural horrors aside, sci-fi trilogies (like *Back to the Future*, *Cube*, *The Fly*, *Jurassic Park*, *Mad Max*, *The Matrix*, the Quatermass films, *Spy Kids*, *Terminator*, *Transformers*, *Universal Soldier*, *X-Men*) have been far fewer in number, although the *Star Trek* movie series included a fine narrative trilogy – *Wrath of Khan*, *Search for Spock*, *Voyage Home* – within the studio franchise. And of course, there's also the unique space opera double-trilogy of *Star Wars* movies.

Made in 1990, Paul Verhoeven's **Total Recall: Ultimate Rekal Edition** (Blu-ray, 16 July) is a new HD restoration/digital re-master. This is the middle film in an accidental trilogy, following the classic *RoboCop* (1987) and the wholly undervalued *Starship Troopers* (1997). The latter movie closes this trilogy despite a gap



ANIMETRICS

Written by Katsuhiro (Akira, *Steamboy*) Ohtomo, and directed by Hiroyuki (Blood: The Last Vampire) Kitakubo, SF comedy **Roujin-Z** (Blu-ray/DVD, 11 June) is low-key compared to grander scale adventures of many other Japanese animated movies. Invalid widower Takazawa receives an untested super-bed with robotic functions but the old man breaks out of a geriatric ward, becomes a cyborg and goes on a city-wide rampage. As techno farce, this is hardly funny at all. Its bad taste jokes, that include smutty scenes with young nurses, add nothing of interest to the absurdity of a rogue mecha/cyborg, hacked by other elderly patients in hospital, so the super-bed melds with assorted machines including a lorry and a TV camera, ready for combat against its military version. All the old man wants is a trip to the beach. A sympathetic nurse helps fulfil that wish. Predictably, the aftermath sees a scandal erupting in epilogue. But there's no yahtzee!



Adapted by director Hayao Miyazaki from the novel by Diana Wynne Jones, **Howl's Moving Castle** (Blu-ray, 25 June) is an animated feature that packs in so many minor details for its meagre storyline, whimsical asides, and quirky characters, that it's overstuffed like the home of a clutter-blind hoarder. Of changeable age, the uncertain heroine Sophie (voiced by Jean Simmons and Emily Mortimer) encounters the voice of fire, a pogo-stick scarecrow, and outlaw wizard Howl (voiced, laughably, by Christian Bale), while she fuffs about in the walking rundown residence of the title. Of course, there's a dog: an iconically cute dog. Naturally, the odd fairytale reaches a satisfactory happy ending. But all of its genre ideas are rendered largely insignificant by wildly irregular mood swings and a tone of narrative veering from hopelessly trite sermon to vacuous daydream.

Made in 2006, **Tales From Earthsea** (Blu-ray, 25 Jun) is based on a fantasy milieu series created by Ursula Le Guin during the post-Tolkien 1960s. Basically,



it's about people that change into monsters. Earthsea is a world of picture postcard isles amidst uncharted seas so you might imagine that this cod-mythical scenario would be well suited to Japanese cultural sensibilities. The movie was the first job as a director for Hayao Miyazaki's son Goro. Not having read any of the *Earthsea* books, I cannot say how faithless this Studio Ghibli adaptation is to Le Guin's original stories, but as it's largely populated by sundry fantasy tropes (slavery, dragons, wizards) and bland stereotyped characters, it fails to be any more entertaining than the 2004 live action TV mini-series. It is concerned with an ecology of magic focused by 'true names', yet this element only comes across as another brand of 'new age' waffle delivered in slow and pedantic fashion, and with a cartooned literalness of quite plainly unimaginative visualisations that fail to achieve the poetic artistry of the very best animated cinema. Timothy Dalton and Willem Dafoe are in the voice cast but they fail to bring dramatic strength to the English dubbed version.

of several years during which Verhoeven made *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls* as if he was simply waiting for CGI technology to develop sufficiently for a realistic depiction of arachnid hordes of alien monsters. All three of Verhoeven's superb SF-action movies launched their own franchises of cinema sequels and/or television shows, proving their worth as commercial if not mainstream hits.

What makes *RoboCop*, *Total Recall*, and *Starship Troopers* a genre/auteurist trilogy – perhaps a movie 'triptych', according to an artistic-based definition noted in *Film Trilogies* (although this particular trilogy is ignored in the book) – is the unique combination of satirical content (with a foreigner's jaundiced views of US politics and corporate shenanigans), plenty of gory action-thriller heroics, and, most importantly, a kind of wrecked future-history, where each movie shifts forward in a fractured timeline and outwards into deep space, with a typical futuristic perspective so common in SF:

from a near-future Detroit in *RoboCop* to an interplanetary adventure in 2084 (echoing Orwell's 1984) for *Total Recall*, and a seemingly later interstellar conflict era in *Starship Troopers*. This thematic development ranges from earthbound cybernetic prototype, to off-world colonisation, and infantry survivalism (a gritty below-decks' alternative to the elitist bridge crew intrigues of *Star Trek*), such that, even if only in retrospect, a trilogy of sorts is evident in Verhoeven's sci-fi works.

In rough divisions, we have three kinds of memory: 'semantic' (talking, general knowledge), 'muscle' (reflexes, physical skills), and 'episodic' (identity, relationships). When the protagonist of *Total Recall* discovers that his identity is a lie, it's his barely suppressed muscle memories that return unbidden first, before he recovers his name. Planned amnesia, or implanted experiences, so perfectly characteristic of PKD works in the dreams-for-sale plotline of *Total Recall*, makes this movie the most complex/

layered of Verhoeven's SF trilogy. Although lacking the greater emotional intensity of *RoboCop*, *Total Recall* benefits from subtly shifting levels of conspiratorial intrigue in much the same way that Joss Whedon's superb TV *Dollhouse* (*Interzone* #224, #231) explored aspects of memory implants for spy games, yet espionage role-play in *Total Recall* harks all the way back to Gerry Anderson's TV series *Joe 90* (1968–9). Adding to his obvious screen presence, Schwarzenegger gives one of his best performances in *Total Recall*. In the most accomplished and witty scene, worried outlaw hero Quaid/Hauser is asked which sounds the most plausible: "you're having a paranoid episode triggered by acute neurochemical trauma [or] you're really an invincible secret agent from Mars who's the victim of an interplanetary conspiracy to make him think he's a lowly construction worker." Can the remake of *Total Recall* (UK cinemas, 29 August), directed by Len (Underworld) Wiseman, do any better than that?

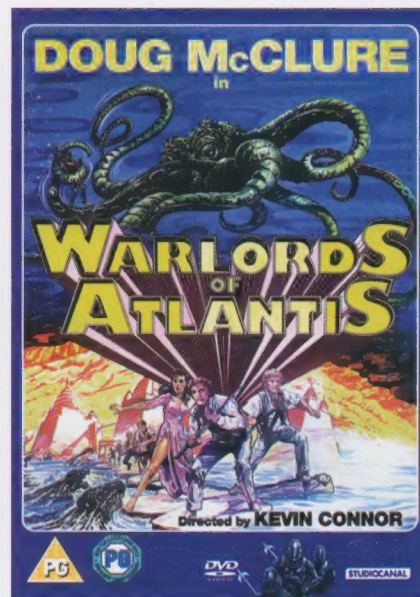


AMICUS REALMS

Following a cycle of serious sci-fi when big American genre movies like *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Omega Man* (1971) and *Soylent Green* (1973) starred Charlton Heston (1923–2008), British studio Amicus headlined Doug McClure (1935–95) in a batch of screen adventures. Compared to those confrontational dramas from Hollywood, these movies were light-hearted escapist fare but, as directed by Kevin Connor, **The Land That Time**



Forgot (1975) and **At The Earth's Core** (1976) reworked Edgar Rice Burroughs' lost world sagas of Caspak and Pellucidar, resulting in a tolerably cheesy brace of monster movies with an enduring cult appeal, while **Warlords of Atlantis** (1978) continued the Burroughsian themes, but from an original screenplay by Brian Hayles. **They Came From Beyond Space** (1967) was directed by Freddie Francis, and it's certainly the odd one out of this batch, all re-released on DVD, 30 July. This older picture plays like a mix of



Quatermass 2 and *The Avengers*, as meteors land in formation, and scientists sent to Cornwall fall prey to mind control of blue kryptonite as the bloody plague strikes. Dr Temple (Robert Hutton, *Slime People*) has immunity via a silver plate in his skull, and he investigates secret goings-on at a farm with army guards. A rocket launches from an underground lab. There's a mystery blonde, and a redhead totes a ray-gun: "I will not have sentiment interfering with our vital work!" If you liked weirdo alien menaces of *Invaders From Mars* (1953),



zombie flick *Invisible Invaders* (1959) and Alan Bridges' *Invasion* (1965), "Soon, you will be one of us."

The Land That Time Forgot sees shipwrecked McClure & Co hijack a U-boat, only to sail off course to South America and the dinosaur nation where cavemen also exist, so proving creationism right! A potentially useful oil field is eventually lost to volcanic activity, and the mountain erupts on cue, prompting a betrayal that resulted in sequel *People That Time Forgot* (1977). Once state-of-the-art special effects (tech artistry by

Derek Meddings and Roger Dicken) are delightfully cheesy by today's standards, and that's part of these movies' retro charm. *At the Earth's Core* is my personal favourite Amicus version of an ERB milieu, partly because of Peter Cushing's droll portrayal of a Victorian scientist, partly for the presence of Caroline Munro as a princess rescued from slavery, but also because I liked the chutzpah of telepathic bat monsters and the Iron Mole always reminded me of a similar pod machine from TV's *Thunderbirds* of the previous decade. Shifting from subterranean exploration to underwater treasure hunt, *Warlords of Atlantis* features Shane Rimmer (voice of Scott on *Thunderbirds*) as skipper of an American ship with a diving bell attacked by sea monsters.

Washed ashore, the crew discover a sunken continent. Terrors are kitsch, suspense is fleeting, ex-Martians wear bad wigs, and there is no sign of seven cities of gold here (although visuals benefit from Cliff Culley's matte paintings), but leggy dancer Cyd Charisse is a novelty guest as the Atlantean queen, a representative of tyranny intent on creating a scientific utopia. If drawling cowboy McClure made his name in our genre as the B-grade counterpart of A-list stoic Heston, well at least his best work has not been remade as 21st century supersized blockbusters for the likes of ineffectual bluffers such as Will Smith or Mark Wahlberg.

BACKLIST

"I think I'm gonna miss the back yard."

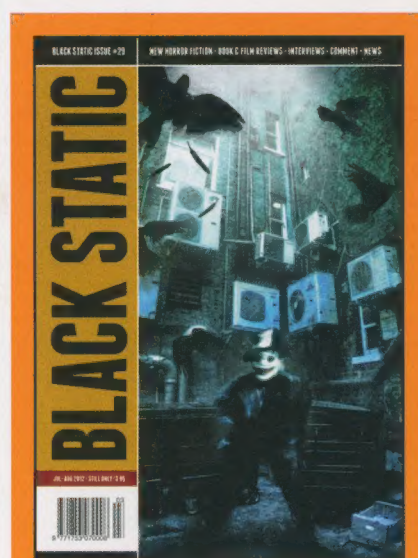
Directed by Michael Polish, **The Astronaut Farmer** (2006) is about Texas rancher Charlie Farmer (Billy Bob Thornton, star of the Coens' *The Man Who Wasn't There*), whose ambitious DIY project to build a rocket in his barn gets him into trouble with the federal government, in the wake of Patriot Act crackdowns by the FBI, and Homeland Security paranoia.

While it mulls over failures and successes with regard to mankind's grandest technological dream, this delivers a heartfelt drama exploring inspirational spaceman adventure, with an easily tolerable (and I have a very low tolerance!) level of American schmaltz, attuned to big blue sky thinking. It's a borderline sci-fi which harks back to a time of Dan Dare, Quatermass' British Rocket Group, and Clarke's postwar tales – when technocrat

pioneers looked upwards with a genuine vision and saw that there was space enough for all of us.

It recalls TV series *Salvage 1* (1979), Apollo 13 is mentioned, *The Right Stuff* is cited visually in a knowing tribute scene, and it is often genuinely moving – if you still think rocket science branded sci-fi deserves better treatment on screen than a cynical exploitation of genre tropes for empty Hollywood spectacle. It moves at a well judged pace with expertly timed comedy and wisely pitched tragedy. Its rural setting, superb casting (Virginia Madsen plays Charlie's supportive wife, Bruce Dern is her savvy dad, and even the family's young kids are excellent performers), and shadings of coherent philosophy, offsetting Charlie's apparently absurd but relentless obsession, echo Phil Alden Robinson's baseball fantasy *Field of Dreams* (1989), albeit without any overtly characterised supernatural element.

As Charlie is heavily in debt, and under



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pressure from his local bank's threat of foreclosure, the best legal advice he receives is to court media attention when TV gets wind of a launch plan that seems more like Basil Dearden's *Man in the Moon* (1960), or a Disneyesque reworking of Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, than anything resembling Clint Eastwood's millennial *Space Cowboys*, or a corporate privatisation of NASA programmes.

Charlie's determination recognises no official boundaries. His family man heroism is both an admirably quiet rebellion and eccentrically subversive action. This is uplifting, wonderfully quirky, winningly humorous ("If I was building a WMD, you wouldn't be able to find it"), and offers effective thematic counterpunches against its anachronisms, numerous tech errors, and blatant predictability.

Score one for the little guy.

'Rocket Man' by Elton John plays over the end credits, of course.

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